

THE USE OF ENGLISH

BEING A

PRIMER OF DIRECT ENGLISH

by

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P R E F A C E

I am grateful to Harold Orton, Professor of English Language in the University of Leeds, for reading this volume. I recall that it was in the days when we were colleagues in the British Council, during my wartime service as Educational Director, that our attention was first directed to the greatness of the problems of a Direct English for national and international communications.

I am indebted to His Majesty's Stationery Office for permission to quote from the official publications issued by them.

B. IFOR EVANS

CHAPTER I

The importance of the English Language for Government, Commerce, and all types of Administration. The need for a Simpler or Direct English.

That English should be used in the best possible way is important for a number of reasons. First, Government relies increasingly on the written word for regulations, memoranda and reports. Although most of these are written by very able men they are seldom written by men with training to express an idea in the shortest and the simplest words. Government loses very substantial sums yearly by the time consumed in the composition, the reproduction and the reading of the unnecessary words in all the written matter which it circulates. Writers trained in Direct English could reduce some reports by a half and very many by a third without any loss of meaning.

The possibility of saving large sums as I have suggested may be challenged. But a long document is not only wasteful in typing and printing. Its unnecessary length wastes the time of everyone who has to read it. If a document circulated to a Committee of thirty members can be reduced so that it takes thirty minutes instead of sixty minutes to read, then fifteen hours of expensive time will be

saved. When the document is a pamphlet that has to be read by hundreds of thousands the saving in time will be much greater. Further it must be remembered that the document is probably too long partly because it states things more than once and because it is not clear in its thought.

The size of the problem can be realized from the fact that Ministers addressed to the public in 1948 a total of 2,857 rules and orders. This is on an average about 55 a week. They touch the industrial, social and personal life of the community. Thus Statutory Instrument 1470 of 1948 makes it 'the duty of every woman who, being an insured person, marries . . . to give notice to the Minister in writing of her marriage not later than eight weeks thereafter'. Rules such as this from the Minister of National Insurance affect very large numbers of people. *The Times* noted on 25th January, 1948 that the National Insurance Advisory Committee had reported to the Minister that many of the rules were 'extremely hard to understand and could surely be drafted in language more intelligible to the layman'. According to *The Times* the Committee on the very page where it made this complaint tried its own hand at drafting an additional regulation, and this is what emerged:

. any person who would be entitled to any benefit under the Act but for these regulations shall be treated as if he were entitled thereto for the purpose of any rights

or obligations under the act and the regulations made thereunder (whether of himself or some other person) which depend on his being so entitled, other than for the purposes of the right to payment of that benefit.'

This example is unfortunately in no way an exaggerated one, and the people of England are in danger of being governed by a mass of verbiage which neither they nor their rulers understand.

If Government can effect savings by the use of Direct English so can local authorities, councils and committees of all types, business houses, banks, institutions, and indeed any organization that uses the written word. For commercial houses and all businesses the saving in costs has a more immediate importance than for governments, for here the effect on an income and expenditure account can be estimated. All firms should have a costing figure showing them what is spent on written matter and what would be saved in typing and printing costs, and in the readers' time if the material at present circulated could be reduced by, say, one-third. It would be an economy for larger concerns to employ writers trained in Direct English who could be used to effect these reductions. Smaller firms might at least have the benefit of a consultative service in Direct English.

As far as I can discover some business houses are worse offenders than the Government Departments. The Civil Servant works under the vigilant eye of the Press, and when

he writes in a pompous way he may always find his letter copied in the correspondence column of some newspaper and accompanied by an abusive comment. But business houses are subject to little criticism beyond that which they may impose on themselves. For this reason it is particularly important that they should develop their own domestic checks to see whether they are wasting money and time and irritating their customers and clients by communications that are unnecessarily long and elaborate.*

Apart from official circulars, memoranda and directives, the Government, through H.M. Stationery Office, has become one of the largest publishers of general literature. For instance, it was reported that the *Lynskey Report* sold 35,000 copies on the first day of publication in 1949. Popular items such as the *A.B.C. of Cookery* sold a quarter of a million copies. The sales of the daily *Hansard* reports of Parliamentary proceedings have risen from a pre-war figure of less than 5,000 to about 30,000. Many of these publications are very effectively produced, and the actual printing and presentation as executed by the Stationery Office itself is on a high standard. The fact remains that as the Government has now become a publisher on a large scale its responsibility for the English which it puts into its books and pamphlets has increased.

There is further the important and complex problem of the clarification of technical communications. A lead has been given here recently by Professor Reginald O. Kapp,

Professor of Electrical Engineering at University College, London, whose lectures have been published as *The Presentation of Technical Information*. He shows that as far as technical terms themselves in engineering are concerned 'the Nomenclature Committee of the British Standards Institution has for years been responsible for the technical vocabulary of the profession. Constantly watchful, it has been able to establish suitable technical terms before unsuitable ones have gained currency. The result is a living, growing, flexible, unambiguous vocabulary, in which every word can be justified scientifically, logically and linguistically.' Professor Kapp realizes, however, that technical words themselves occupy only a small part of technical communications. The necessity, he emphasizes, is for clear and concentrated writing in the statements in which technical information is conveyed.

It must be admitted that for some types of business letters and for some types of publicity work a conventional language must be employed until the public has become more receptive to a simpler tradition. Further, no change can be made, at present, in the complex language of the law. Yet these exceptions still leave a very large body of business and governmental writing which could with greater clarity and with no loss of meaning be expressed far more briefly than at present. If a tradition of Direct English could be generally introduced it would gradually lead to elimination of the clumsy and elaborate expressions which are con-

sidered either polite or efficient by some business houses. For instance, to quote the simplest of all examples, the replacement of 'Esq.' by 'Mr' would save the typing of some millions of 'q's' every year. Even more economical would be the deletion of 'Mr' itself with the use of a prefatory 'Miss' or 'Mrs' only in describing women. Unless, of course, in an equalitarian society we ultimately decide that the married or non-married estate of males must be described by title as well as that of females.

These simple and mechanical savings could not be introduced by pioneering firms without censure from their customers, and they must await a general reconsideration of the requirements of official and business correspondence. Some lead in instituting these modest economies might be expected from Government Departments, especially those such as the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Labour which have a vast correspondence with the public. Fortunately, as I shall show in the chapters which follow, large economies can be effected without making any changes that might evoke criticism.

I have already admitted that, at present, there can be no immediate change in the complex language of the law. In this volume I am dealing with statements that are not going to be submitted to the exacting scrutiny of the courts. When laws are drafted an attempt is made to safeguard against those who will later try and twist out of a phrase a meaning not originally intended. Those who draft legal

statements attempt to foresee all possible interpretations and unforeseen contingencies, and especially to defeat the attempts of that small minority who for their own base uses take advantage of every omission or defect in draftsmanship to evade the law. The result is a language which to the layman is meaningless. This is unfortunate but ultimately it is an ethical and not a verbal question. As long as men deceive each other they will need a language which will attempt to protect them from such deceptions. Further they will need a profession of learned men who will argue with each other whether there has been any such deception or not. I deal in these chapters with statements where both sides are co-operating to try and discover the meaning, and where even if there is a failure of communication the consequence is not a legal penalty.

Numerous examples could be quoted of the special ways in which legal language operates and of the special precautions necessary in its employment. Many will recall the case of Caleb Diplock, the famous miser who left £520,000. He instructed an Eastbourne solicitor to draw up a will by which all his estate went to charities, and as he did not desire to choose the charities himself he entrusted this task to his executors. The solicitor made Caleb leave his estate to be divided among 'such charitable institutions or other charitable *or* benevolent object or objects as his executors might in their absolute discretion select'. To the layman this seems satisfactory. But by saying *or* when he should

have said *and*, the solicitor gave the executors the choice of endowing benevolence or of endowing charity.

The virtues of charity and benevolence are almost incapable of precise definition, and in their application they often overlap each other. A charitable purpose must also be benevolent, but the converse is not of necessity true. The use of the word *or* made the precise objects of the gift uncertain, whereas the use of the word *and* would have clarified the bequest by limiting it to objects which were both charitable and benevolent. The context of the will gave no guide, and in view of the uncertainty caused by the use of the word *or*, the learned Law Lords declared the bequest void, and the next of kin took the money. You may or may not agree with the justice of the final decision, but if you have any doubts on the matter you should read the judgment of Mr Justice Farwell, the judge of the court of first instance, which occupies fully twenty-five pages of the All England Reports. Having done that you should read the 50,000 word judgment of the judges of the Court of Appeal and finish with the odd 13,000 words or so of the Law Lords. In all a mere 70,000 words – the length of an average novel – resulting from the use of an *or* for an *and*.

While the language of the law undoubtedly presents problems and difficulties it would be unwise for the people of England to rest permanently satisfied with the increasing complexity and prolixity of legal language. We need a campaign for intelligible laws, and for intelligible inter-

pretations of the law. Codification of existing law and judicial decisions in statutes couched in intelligible language appears to be the only solution.

While setting aside legal language I note that one of the dangers at the present time arises from the fact that many officials, who are not trained lawyers, make statements which have no legal sanction, yet write as if they were lawyers. They fall back, as I shall illustrate later, on an elaborate phrasing and a redundant expression because they feel that in this way they are being clearer and more effective. In some instances this inflated language arises from the pride of the official in his own profession. He increases his dignity by enlarging the mystery of his communications. Often, I believe, the elaborate language arises from a sincere but wrong belief that it is somehow safer to imitate legal language. Yet the great majority of the communications made by officials to the public are such that a misunderstanding brings no legal penalty. It cannot be too strongly stated that where the statement is *co-operative* (that is both sides are trying to reach a meaning) and not *legal* (that is where one side is trying to deceive the other, or, if this language is considered too strong, where both sides are competing to get a different meaning from a passage) then Direct English or expression in the simplest words and the most brief statement is always to be sought.

It would be unjust to say that Government circles are not aware of this problem of verbal inflation and some steps

have been taken to meet it. The Stationery Office has published a pamphlet by Sir Ernest Gowers entitled *Plain Words*, and this has been given a wide circulation in the Civil Service. Sir Ernest Gowers, on the basis of his great experience, is appealing to every Civil Servant to aim at a clearer and briefer way of writing. I am here suggesting that his stimulating and suggestive approach should be followed by more detailed proposals on method. I am convinced that we shall not get the reductions which the public deserves and which the continuation of orderly Government demands unless officers are specifically assigned, with adequate training, to the task of checking and reducing the verbal output of their departments.

Apart from the general circulation of Sir Ernest Gowers's pamphlet some individual departments have taken active steps to improve the efficiency of the English which they use. I have not made an exhaustive examination of what is at present being done in the Civil Service, but several departments have been good enough to answer my enquiries. The Ministry of Health informed me that 'at present, no officer in this Department is charged with the central responsibility of attending to the reduction of memoranda' though senior officers do revise circulars before they are 'printed or neo-styled for issue to the public'. I was fortunate to discover that the Ministry of Labour was alert to the importance of all these problems of courteous, clear and simple English. Sir Godfrey Ince, the Permanent

Secretary, gave me an account of what they have so far achieved.

There is an Instructions Branch in the Ministry of Labour which attempts to see that all instructions sent out to Branches of the Ministry shall be in a clear, simple and standard form. These instructions to Local Branches are often the basis of instructions to the public and an attempt has been made through a code to see that these are clear, simple and uniform. The Ministry also has a Staff Training Branch and here an attempt is made to improve the style of all new officers. Among the staff handbooks printed by this Branch of the Ministry of Labour is one on *Letter and Minute Writing*: an emphasis is placed on 'clarity, simplicity, accuracy, completeness, courtesy and promptness'. This pamphlet is excellent and practical and gives precise instructions in style, in letter writing, both official and informal, and in the writing of minutes and memoranda. I hope that some who have profited by it will be prepared to continue their desire for reform of an even more radical kind by the use of Direct English.

I have already stated that legal language is a language by which men attempt to protect themselves from deception. Unfortunately the concept of deception enters into official language in another and more insidious way. I fear that a number of letters which issue from government departments by their equivocation, ambiguity and concealment are in one way or another attempts to protect their de-

partments from an over-inquisitive public. Sir Ernest Gowers in *Plain Words* assumes that on the whole a Civil Servant is attempting to make direct statements but sometimes failing to do so. Actually the official is on occasion making no such attempt but using verbal elaboration as a defence between himself and his public. For instance Sir Ernest Gowers, emphasizing the need for clarity and simplicity, wrote: 'I quoted a saying of Matthew Arnold that the secret of style was to have something to say and to say it as clearly as you can. The basic fault of present-day writing is a tendency to say what one has to say in as complicated a way as possible. Instead of being simple, terse and direct, it is stilted, long-winded and circumlocutory; instead of choosing the simple word it prefers the unusual.' A very senior Treasury official, Sir Wilfrid Eady, commented on Sir Ernest Gowers's pamphlet in a radio talk and I am grateful for his permission to reproduce a passage here. He seized on this very point of whether the motive behind an official letter was necessarily the making of clear and direct statements.

'As a very young man', he said, 'I became momentarily impatient of the rigmaroles of the official style and served up a draft letter no doubt of a tiresomely affected simplicity. The rebuke was magisterial: "This is an objectionable draft, for three reasons. You and your words are, officially, of the utmost insignificance. You are supposed to be uttering the words of the Secretary of State and a Secretary of

State speaks with due ceremony. Second, your correspondent will expect language which respects the importance to him of the matter on which he has written. He might well regard this intimate and button-holing letter as a piece of official flippancy, a malady most incident to young men. You are a servant of the public. Third, there is a ritual about these things. Ritual is a power; it confirms faith and reverence. Abandon ritual at your peril."

'A Minister, popular and experienced with Parliament, always refused to say "No, Sir", in answer to a Parliamentary Question. It would seem abrupt, negligent, discourteous, whereas "The answer is in the negative", suggests careful enquiry, anxious weighing-up and a regretful shaking of the head.'

On occasion the official finds himself in a position where he wishes to protect himself with an evasive and non-committal answer and he resorts to circumlocution deliberately for this reason. Readers of Joyce Cary's *The African Witch* will remember the care with which Burwash, the Resident of Rimi in Nigeria, conducted his official correspondence. The picture is of course fictional, but it may be less invidious in this instance to rely on fiction rather than on fact and I am grateful to Joyce Cary for giving me permission to quote this passage.

Burwash, it will be recalled, 'was a slow composer in English, and, moreover, a very cautious one. Like a bad chess player, he spent a long time in anxious meditation

over 'the simplest moves.' He was most worried when his assistant Fiske wrote in a draft: 'I can't find the old letters about Joseph Makurdi's claim to this site, as the files have been eaten by ants'. Burwash outlined the distressing impression that such 'a bald narrative would make at headquarters and then he suggested a modification: 'What about this? - H'm - "The present situation in regard to Joseph Makurdi's claim is complicated by a gap in the correspondence relating to the original application" - or hiatus, - yes, "hiatus in the correspondence. This has produced an impasse which may prove difficult to surmount." '

The use of Direct English in all official communications would necessitate a change in the ethical, as well as in the linguistic, habits of our public life. There remains, however, the large body of memoranda, inter-departmental material, committee papers, and the like which could be much reduced in bulk if Direct English were practised.

It is for these reasons that I have turned aside from my own tasks as a writer and as a critic to comment on this subject because I am convinced that it is of primary importance for the survival of the modern, democratic and bureaucratic society in which we live to simplify *communication*. No senior official today and no business executive can hope to read all the papers and memoranda which are set before him in the course of a week. The whole functioning of our modern state is in danger of being clogged by words and by unnecessary words. The hope of the survival

of renewed opportunities for thought, discussion and leisure, in fact the possibility of a civilized life, depends on the reduction of the number of words which government and business houses now circulate. It is very difficult to convince men and women, even those who suffer most, of this danger of words. The increased centralization of government will mean an increase of orders, instructions and memoranda. Unless they are understood, and quickly understood, this new Leviathan which we have created cannot function. The danger is as great in war as in peace, for the *paper war* created by officials and soldiers alike can at times seriously affect the efficiency of the fighting services.

Few English people realize what a fine instrument they possess in their language. Unfortunately our educational system has not led us to the careful employment of English or to any cherishing of its tradition. In the Public Schools Latin and Greek have been most carefully taught, but an ability to write English has been too often taken for granted. Mr Winston Churchill, one of the great masters of the written and the spoken word in English, has described how low ~~was~~ his order in the School List at Harrow as a small boy, but, he adds, when others went on to learn Latin and Greek, and 'splendid things like that', he was taught English. He describes the teaching of his master, Mr Somervell: 'not only did we learn English, parsing thoroughly, but we also practised continually English analysis'.¹ I do

¹*My Early Life*, by the Rt. Hon. Winston Churchill (1930).

not want to make this a battle of the modern and the ancient languages. I would record that I heard Mr Churchill, speaking in 1948 at the University of London, say that he regretted all he had said in his youth about Latin and Greek. Certainly translating from English into Latin or Greek is one of the safest ways of discovering if what one has written in English is clearly expressed. Dryden tells us that whenever he was uncertain whether he had written his meaning adequately in a passage he proceeded to translate it into Latin. For most of us this method is interesting to read about but not very useful in practice. Let the classics not only survive but let their place become once again more important. But at the same time let us not neglect our own English speech.

The Universities, for instance, though they have pursued the study of Old English and Middle English have no departments in which the practical and current use of Modern English can be examined. There is no official Academy in England concerned with the encouragement of the clear and comely use of English, although that great master of English, Jonathan Swift, was advocating, even in the early eighteenth century, the necessity for some such establishment. Individual voices have spoken up for English from the days of Elizabeth onwards but there has been no concerted movement. John Locke, for example, in the late seventeenth century saw the true way: 'to write and speak correctly', he comments in his *Thoughts in Education*, 'gives

a grace and gains a favourable attention to what one has to say; and since it is English that an English gentleman will have constant use of, that is the language he should chiefly cultivate'.

Apart from the importance of the English language to the British people themselves it must be a matter of common consent that English is our nearest approach to a universal language. It may be that in Europe a knowledge of French will carry one as far as English, possibly farther, but when the whole world is considered, with the use of English throughout the Dominions, in the Colonies, in India, Africa, China and Japan it is clear that no other language can compete with it as a possible universal medium. Again, though the American language must be regarded as a language distinct from English, there is a large measure of common material in vocabulary and idiom, and these elements have been increased by contacts during the Second World War, by modern methods of communication, such as radio and films, and by personal and governmental relations.

The position of the use of English in India is one of the greatest importance in the future of world affairs. It would seem, as H. N. Brailsford has expressed it¹, that India 'has walked out of the English-speaking world'. But there is to be a crucial period of five years during which English will share with Hindi and the provincial vernaculars the status

¹*New Statesman and Nation*, 4 December 1948.

of an official language. Mulk Raj Anand in a pamphlet called *The King-Emperor's English* has suggested that what India will get rid of is the official English of the blue books and the memoranda, but that she will preserve English in its simpler forms and in the varied and coloured forms in which it has been used in English literature. 'This English we prize so much', he writes, 'as against the King-Emperor's English, was never the language of our conquerors, for it is not they who cherished it or brought it into our lives; no, it was the language we ourselves took from the heart of England, not as an act of submission but through a genuine love of its graces.'

All these considerations should lead Englishmen to realize that their language is one of their greatest national possessions. This position which the English language has constituted for itself should be of great value to us as a nation, and equally it is a great responsibility. The commercial and economic benefits which should derive to a trading nation by this world-wide circulation of our language are obvious. It should also make it possible for English literature and British ways of life to be made widely known.

CHAPTER II

Examples of the Use of Direct English: The Writing of Advertisements

Before attempting to describe the principles of Direct English I give a number of examples. In each instance I have quoted a passage of prose and then seen what has been effected in reducing its length or increasing its clarity by rendering it into Direct English. Usually these two processes work simultaneously. At the same time I remind the reader that unlike many writers on English I am interested in brevity in all practical communications, for on brevity will depend the saving of the time of the community. So in some of the instances I have quoted the original is not obscure but only long-winded.

I have elected to quote examples before proceeding to general principles to indicate Direct English at work. So much in its employment depends rather on a way of thought than on a set of rules. One's grammar may be correct and each sentence may convey a meaning and yet the whole may be much more elaborate and long-winded than is necessary. My comments on the contrasts between the original and the Direct version illustrate the methods which I am employing. I have selected a number of passages of

what seem to me average specimens of current English and then I have attempted to re-write them in Direct English. I take them from passages which are not incompetently written but which could all be made shorter and clearer if skill and attention had been directed to this end.

I begin with two examples of advertisements which are based on real examples but I have changed a number of details to make them 'anonymous'.

First I quote an advertisement for a 'representative'.

The Firm invites applications from Scottish University graduates for the post of Area Officer. Aberdeen. Candidates must be men and aged preferably between 28 and 40. They should have a wide interest in and up-to-date knowledge of Scottish affairs, with particular reference to education, folk-lore, archaeology, and history; and in addition good organizing and administrative ability. Duties include the Firm's representation in the North of Scotland; negotiations with academic institutions and civic authorities; welfare and placing of Overseas post-graduate students, conducting courses, exhibitions, etc. Salary according to age and qualifications within the scale of £540-£892 per annum (including consolidated addition). Application forms and further particulars may be obtained from the Director to whom completed application forms should be returned within two weeks of today's date.

An advertisement of this length if placed in the 'Public Appointments' column of *The Times* at the rate of 18s. for three lines would cost £5 8s. 0d.

The same matter written in Direct English would, I suggest, read as follows:

The Firm wants a Scottish University Graduate, male, as Area Officer, Aberdeen; preferably 28 to 40; knowing Scotland well, especially education, folk-lore, archaeology, history; to represent them in Northern Scotland, plan courses & exhibitions; contact academic and civic authorities; placing & welfare of overseas post-graduate students. Salary by age & qualifications on a scale £540-£892 yearly (consolidated addition included). For more information & application forms (returnable two weeks from today) send to Director.

With this wording the advertisement in the 'Public Appointments' column of *The Times* would cost £3 0s. 0d. Thus there would be a saving of £2 8s. 0d. on this single announcement. A large corporation that has continually to make such announcements would make a substantial saving in the course of a year. Nor is the saving in money alone, for the shorter the advertisement the less time is taken for executives and for the candidates themselves to read it.

How does the Direct English version differ from the original text? In the first place the passage could have been further reduced if consultation with the advertiser were possible. For instance I retain 'Scottish *University Graduate*', but in what ordinary context does 'graduate' standing alone not mean 'University Graduate'? Again would not 'post-graduate students' be equally intelligible as 'post-graduates'? There are other examples; one would like to know what is the difference between being an 'area officer' and being responsible for the 'firm's representation'.

The reduction in the passage has been made by

(i) examining each phrase in the original to see if it cannot be analysed into something more direct. For instance 'invites applications from' becomes a plain 'wants'.

(ii) Phrases which are conventional in passages of this kind but meaningless have been eliminated. For instance the candidates are told to send in '*completed* application forms'. But need time and space and print be wasted on the unlikely candidate who sends in an application form which is not *completed*?

The long phrase 'a wide interest in and up-to-date knowledge of Scottish affairs' has been reduced to 'knowing Scotland well'. It may be urged that this is inadequate and does not fully represent the original, but, as so often, the context does most of the work, and all additions are unnecessary.

(iii) Above all the passage has been studied to bring together the matter in the most logical sequence, so as to avoid repetition. This is perhaps the most important factor of all. For a simpler language is not dependent on a number of tricks but on clear thinking.

(iv) The only typographical device I have used is substituting '&' for 'and', which over a whole column gives an unexpectedly large saving of space.

I quote another example of 'Advertisement' prose. Again I have modified the original a little to make it 'anonymous'. Further the writer had a difficult statement to make and

I do not in any way question his competence. I would only suggest that with Direct English the passage could be much reduced.

Here is the original passage, modified, again to render it 'anonymous':

Exborough invite applications from registered medical practitioners for the appointment of Deputy Medical Officer of Health and Deputy Port Medical Officer, at a salary of £1550 per annum, increasing by £50 per annum to £1750 per annum. Applicants should possess a Diploma in Public Health and have had wide experience in public health administration, including epidemiology, and should be capable of assuming full responsibility for the supervision of the Public Health Department in the absence of the Medical Officer of Health. Previous experience of Port Health duties is desirable. The person appointed will be required to devote his whole time to the duties of the office, and to pay over to the corporation any fees or other monies received by him in connexion with the appointment. He will also be required to pass a medical examination and to reside within the city. Applications on forms to be obtained from this office, accompanied by three recent testimonials, must be addressed to the Director (endorsed 'Deputy Medical Officer of Health') and be received on or before 1 April, 1947.

An advertisement of this length if placed in the 'Public Appointments' column of *The Times* would cost £6 12s 0d.

In Direct English the passage would read:

Exborough wants registered medical practitioner as full-time Deputy Medical Officer of Health & Deputy Port Medical Officer; to reside in the city & act for Medical

Officer of Health when away; Diploma & wide administrative Public Health experience with epidemiology essential, & of Port Health duties, desirable. Fees & other monies got during duties payable to the Corporation. Yearly salary £1550 rising £50 yearly to £1750. Medical examination required. Send forms (obtainable in this office) & copies of 3 recent testimonials (marked Deputy Medical Officer of Health) by 1 April, 1947 to the Director.

An advertisement of this length if placed in the 'Public Appointments' column of *The Times* would cost £4 4s. 0d. The saving is £2 8s. 0d.

It will be noted that reduction has been made difficult by the number of titles. For instance I naturally reproduce in full 'Deputy Medical Officer of Health' but if consultation were possible I would ask why this should not be 'Deputy Health Officer'. The saving admittedly is a small one, but noticeable in the printing of a Corporation which may have to use the title thousands of times in a year. I leave 'registered medical practitioner', though I question whether in this context 'registered doctor' or even 'doctor' would not do. This is one of the many examples of statements drafted as if they were legal documents when in fact much can be left to the context and the intelligence of the reader.

Briefly I note how Direct English has been able to reduce the length of the passage:

(i) Most important of all here has been the rearranging of the passage into a logical order. The original states qualifications, then salary, then further qualifications, and

then the medical examination requirements. I bring all the references to qualifications together. True ordering of thought is ever the most important way of achieving the brief and clear speech at which Direct English aims.

(ii) I remove repeated phrases as for instance '£1550 *per annum*, increasing by £50 *per annum* to £1750 *per annum*'. This I reduced to: 'Yearly salary £1550 rising £50 yearly to £1750'. Even here I have made a concession for there would be complete clarity if the phrase read: 'Salary £1550 with yearly rise of £50 to £1750'.

(iii) As in the previous passage each phrase of the original is carefully analysed to see if there is not some shorter way of giving clear expression to the idea. For instance the original has 'The person appointed will be required to devote his whole time to the duties of the office'. By placing this with the rest of the description of the office, from which the original separates it, I am able to reduce it to the single word 'full-time'.

In both these passages I have had to retain certain conventional words. For instance I retain 'salary', where 'pay' would be equally clear but socially less attractive. I should like to see all 'salaries' and 'wages' reduced to the single word 'pay' which would be one verbal gesture towards abolishing class distinction.

I fear that some public corporations and firms feel that a long advertisement gives an increased sense of the importance of the post. This is an attitude which it is difficult to

overcome, but one would submit that this was a matter in which public bodies could give a lead. Some may urge that the trouble and time taken to write Direct English does not compensate for the reductions which have been obtained. To this I would reply that, after a reasonable training, Direct English can be composed as easily and more quickly than the longer statements. It may be suggested that the Direct English versions are more difficult to understand as the compression leads to a sort of mental congestion. This arises solely from the fact that we have grown accustomed to statements in which unnecessary and meaningless words and phrases occur. It will further be remembered that so far I have examined the possible employment of Direct English only in advertisements.

I suggest that the savings I have been able to make are sufficient to justify the employment of Direct English, and I emphasize once again that I have not sought out Advertisements which were obviously badly written and where a large reduction in the original statements would be simple.

On this I quote a comment in *The Spectator*:¹ 'I am pretty sure there is no good reason for the inordinate length of the advertisements which local authorities put in the papers when they want to fill a vacancy on their staffs. For instance, I see that the Rural District of Windsor is on the look-out for an estates gardener, a Clerical assistant (female) and a housing manager (male). To make known these requirements they took just under ten

¹8th October, 1948; I am grateful to the Editor for permission to quote.

inches of space on the front page of my local newspaper; this is the equivalent of just under half the whole of the Personal Column in *The Times*, and the cost to the rate-payer was about seven guineas. Each post was advertised separately, so that "Rural District Council of Windsor" appeared three times in large type. So did the name of the Clerk of the Council (in capital letters), his designation and his address. By what I think must have been an oversight, the date – taking up a separate line – was only printed twice. Where you or I, in our frugal way, would merely say "Wanted", the Council spins it out to "Applications are invited from suitably qualified persons for the appointment of . . ." Our "Further particulars from" becomes "A statement of details relating to the appointment may be obtained from the undersigned". There is indeed a certain air of urbanity, a leisurely, old-fashioned grace about these discursive methods; but they seem to me to involve an unnecessary waste of public money, and they are certainly tough on the ordinary farmer or housewife whose two-line *cri du coeur* for an employee gets held over for lack of newsprint!

The examples quoted by *The Spectator* show that the two I have selected for detailed consideration are competent above the average. Every advertisement issued by a public corporation which I examined in *The Times* for 1947 was capable of reduction. There is here a waste of public money and public time.

CHAPTER III

Further Examples of the Use of Direct English: The Writing of Government Memoranda

I will now illustrate the possible use of Direct English in more varied employment. First, I take an example of Direct English applied to a Government Report. Here there is an important difference from 'advertisement' English. Both should have equal clarity but the Report must also have some attractiveness. You do not have to tease your prospective Deputy Health Officer into reading an advertisement because presumably he wants the job, but your Report must be sufficiently engaging to draw readers. As Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch once said: 'Persuasion is the first virtue of Prose, whether in narrative or in argument'. One must admit the use of additional words if these will increase the pleasure or interest of the reader. At the same time one need not concede any lengthening which has come from a sluggish narration or an enervating inflation of style.

I take a passage from the famous 'Beveridge Report'.¹ I choose this document because it seems to me admirably written. Some Government documents could be easily

¹*Social Insurance and Allied Services*. Report by Sir William Beveridge. H.M. Stationery Office, 1942.

reduced to one half or less of their present length with no loss of elegance or meaning and with an increase of clarity. I think that it is better to test Direct English in a statement which is well written though one which presumably has not been written with conscious attention to brevity. The passage I choose as an example reads:

Provision for industrial accident and disease by workmen's compensation in Britain differs from the provision made by social insurance for other interruptions of earning not only in the basis upon which the compensation or benefit is calculated, but also in the method by which the necessary funds are obtained. The form in which provision for industrial accidents was made when workmen's compensation began in 1897, had two consequences. First, it threw the whole cost in the first instance upon the employers; second, it adjusted the burden in each industry to the degree of risk in that industry. This method was justified in 1897 by the Home Secretary of that time, introducing the Workmen's Compensation Bill on the Ground that 'when a person on his own responsibility and for his own profit sets in motion agencies which create risks for others he ought to be responsible for what he does'.

This is, in all, 154 words. In Direct English the passage might be re-written as follows:

Workmen's compensation and benefit for industrial accident and disease differ from benefits from social insurance by the method of calculating the benefit and raising funds. Two results follow the way the compensation began in 1897. All cost fell first on employers and secondly this was adjusted to each industry's risk. The Home Secretary introducing the Workmen's Compensation Bill in

'1897 justified this saying workers' risks should be borne by profit-making employers.

This is 72 words, with a saving of 82 words, or rather more than half the original passage. I have chosen my example at random in the Report, and it is possible that some passages would not submit themselves so well to Direct English. I am also aware that if I had been in touch with the original writer I might have had to modify my version in detail as the passage in the report is not without some ambiguity. If, however, the whole Report could be reduced in the same way as this passage it would be less than one-half its present size. In these calculations it must be remembered that as the words in Direct English are usually shorter than in the original passage the saving is greater than any simple word count might suggest.

I think it might be urged that my rendering is less easily assimilated than the 'looser' statement in the Report itself. The comment has been made to me by intelligent readers, especially those whose main official duties include the reading of many documents. This, I would urge, is a matter of mental discipline. We have grown too accustomed to having phrases repeated for us, and to have the meaning *thinned out* by phrases which do not themselves contribute actively to the content.

I now take a more severe test from a Government Report. Some of the clearest Governmental English is written in the Foreign Office, partly, I suspect, because the Foreign

Office usually has its memoranda written by hand and not dictated to a typist. I am convinced that the amount of paper in circulation in Government Departments could be considerably reduced if all officials were made to draft their memoranda in the first instance by hand instead of dictating them. Dictation is so easy and leads inevitably to verbal inflation. I quote a paragraph from the paper issued in 1943 by the Foreign Office through the Stationery Office on 'Proposals for the Reform of the Foreign Service'. This is admirably composed and its clarity of thought and expression leave little room for Direct English, but there is still a little room.

I again select a passage at random:

Most members of the service will spend the greater part of their careers abroad, sometimes in distant and unhealthy posts. Their situation must, therefore, be considered not as that of men employed in this country, who may occasionally be posted away from home, but rather as that of men who spend most of their careers abroad and are only occasionally posted at home. At present, when transferred to London, Foreign Service officers are subjected not only to personal inconvenience but also to distinct financial disadvantages. Thus, they normally incur considerable indirect expenditure over their transfer, while the comparatively short period for which they may be kept in this country and the uncertainty of their future movements makes it necessary for them to plan their lives on a short-term basis. They thus incur greater expenditure over housing, the education of children, etc., than officials who reside permanently in this country and can

plan their future with greater certainty. Moreover, Foreign Service officers posted to London should not, if they are to do their work properly, be obliged, through lack of means, to cut themselves off from contact with foreign representatives or from those wider contacts which are necessary if they are to be effective representatives of this country when they go abroad again.

This passage is excellent in clarity and in parts no reduction of length can be achieved without changing the meaning. Its length is 214 words. I attempt a rendering into Direct English as:

Most officers work mainly abroad, sometimes in distant and unhealthy posts. They cannot be treated as men working at home who occasionally work overseas; rather they work abroad with some periods at home. On coming to London they have inconvenience and extra expense. Their indirect moving costs are high. As their stay is short, and their next posting unknown they must plan on a short-term basis. So their costs of housing, education of children etc., are higher than home-based officials, securely able to plan their future. Also officers to be efficient on short-term postings in London should not be cut off through lack of means from foreign representatives and the wider contacts necessary if they are to be effective British representatives on returning abroad.

The length of the Direct English passage is 121 words, that is there has been a saving of 93 words, or over a third of the original. I think the passage could, without loss of clarity, have been even more briefly expressed, for there would appear to be repetition. In making my briefer ver-

sion I have tried to preserve each phrase in the original even when I find repetition.

As a final example I take a page from the instructions issued through the Ministry of Health. These are going mainly to busy men and women who are giving voluntary service as Governors of Hospitals, or they are going direct to the public, and in many instances to members of the public who have not had the advantage of much education. The first batch of these instructions occupied about fifty pages of foolscap with single spaced typing.

Here is a typical passage on *Specialist Services in the Patient's Home*:

The intention is that the assistance of the specialist should be available for the family doctor in the patient's home when the patient's condition makes it essential for consultation or treatment to take place there. The alternative of attendance at the hospital as an out-patient or admission as an in-patient should be the normal rule, and should be adopted unless medical considerations make it impossible. It will be for the family doctor to determine whether specialist help should be sought, and to shew that it is essential that it should be given at the home of the patient.

This paragraph is in all 98 words. I ask the authorities of the Ministry of Health what would be lost if the whole of this were reduced to one sentence:

When the family doctor decides that patients are too ill to go to hospital as out-patients or in-patients it is hoped he can be assisted by a specialist's visit to the patient's home.

The length of this passage is 33 words, or about one-third of the length of the original. If a similar reduction could have been made in the whole batch of instructions, they could have been issued on some sixteen or seventeen pages of foolscap instead of fifty.

It will be seen that the reduction in this last instance is far greater than in any of the other examples. The reasons are not difficult to discover:

(i) The writer is using a sort of legal language which is so widely used by officials even when not making legal statements or drafting regulations.

(ii) The thought is not ordered. The logical ordering of thought would lead the matter contained in the last sentence of the original to be the first statement made. As a result there is inevitable repetition.

(iii) Half a thought is expressed in one sentence and so the other half has to be expressed in the next. An example can be seen in the frequency with which the word 'patient' is used.

(iv) The writer is afraid of simple and direct words such as 'illness'. He has to say 'the patient's condition'.

(v) Also, though this is a minor point, if in passages of this type one is prepared to use the plural instead of the singular (i.e. 'patients' for 'patient') one saves the use of the definite or indefinite article. So instead of:

'the doctor decides that *the* patient must
we can read

‘the doctor decides that *patients* must . . .’

It is of great social importance, apart from the whole issue of saving time, that Government regulations which are intended for the whole community should be expressed in the most simple language. At present no effort in this direction appears to have been made.

I emphasize again, at the conclusion of this chapter, that I have chosen for analysis passages which seem to me by all ordinary standards to be competently written. It would have been easy to discover less happily expressed extracts. For instance even in a pamphlet with a cultural purpose, such as *UNESCO and a World Society*¹ we can find passages such as:

Money will largely be spent on making it possible for some of the most able minds and skilled talents to work on the diffusion of ideas of human charity among all the nations who are ready to listen. They will, on the one hand, be vigilant for happenings which even in the present world are always tantalising us with their promise of the underlying sympathy of mankind. It might be the story of how half the men of a village risked their lives to take a boat to the rescue of unknown sailors who happened to be wrecked on their piece of the world's shoreline. Or some larger narrative such as a steady maintenance by men most deeply devoted to their country of opposition to that country's policy when they believe it to be wrong. Such stories as these, with their profound undertones, Unesco will seek to have broadcast by film, radio, papers and books to oppose hatred in its many guises.

¹H. M. Stationery Office. 1948.

Comment is superfluous. Such passages are unfortunately not isolated for in the same pamphlet we read :

This, then, is the idea that underlies a bold plan. Unesco will use the best ability it can command to pump an awareness of the range of human virtue through all the great channels of popular communication.

It is not by passages such as these that official English at its best should be judged. My argument is that even at its best it can profit by the use of Direct English. At the same time one would have hoped that UNESCO with its international and cultural aim would have had a department to deal with simple communication. Direct English is the most valuable instrument that any international organization can possess. For English can remain the most natural international medium if only we remain faithful to the simple methods of expression which the structure of the language makes possible. I set out here some practical suggestions for Government Departments and all Local Government bodies or business houses that have to issue memoranda or instructions.

The first draft should be written by hand, and not dictated. If the official is so senior that he can only spare the time to dictate, then his draft should be re-written by some more junior official. All dictation leads to loose writing and repetition.

The first draft should be re-worded to see that all the matter is arranged in a logical order and that no phrase is

repeated. At the same time all words or phrases that make no contribution to the meaning should be cut out. The vocabulary should then be studied to see if the technical terms are necessary and if shorter words could not be substituted for long words in the original. In larger departments the passage should be submitted to a writer trained in Direct English to see if the length of the whole cannot be further reduced. If these steps were taken the amount of typed and printed matter issued from official quarters to the public could be reduced by a third or a half. The reform would be a great one and the saving of time throughout the country would be enormous.

CHAPTER IV

The Nature of Direct English (I): General Principles

I now return from the examples I have given to examine the nature of Direct English in more general terms. I define Direct English as the use of English, preserving the natural idiom of the language, with a close regard to lucid expression and to brevity. I have avoided any artificial modification of the language either in spelling or vocabulary. My reason for avoiding any artificial reform is that I am convinced that a language is a living organism and that the only changes which can be easily and universally introduced into a language are those which fit its natural structure. Artificial changes can be made acceptable only to small groups or very gradually or by the dictates of a totalitarian government.

The only recent revolutionary changes brought about in the form and structure of a language by a totalitarian government are those introduced by Kemal Ataturk into the Turkish language. Of these but little is known in this country. He abolished the Arabic script and introduced the Latin script and he introduced new words of Turkish origin for words of Arabic origin. These changes were undoubtedly made effective, but only because Kemal Ataturk

had complete control over all the organs of the Press, and over the whole educational system. Happily, totalitarian methods are not available to us in this country and we can proceed only with what can be achieved by common consent. As I advocate that the reforms which I describe as Direct English should be general and immediate, as essential to the economic and mental life of the country, I contain my proposals for action within the natural idiom of the language.

I am, in all this, far from commenting adversely on those who have worked strenuously to reform our language either by spelling reforms or by introducing a simplified though artificial language. The difficulty of the spelling of English has been exaggerated and we can offer in compensation that our grammar is so simple. Some modest degree of spelling reform could without embarrassment be introduced into the schools, and it would gradually spread into the language. For instance we could begin with some simplifications which could be easily introduced such as using *thru* for *through* and *tho* for *though*. But all the spelling reforms that the public as a whole would accept could not reduce in the manner I propose the great mass of printed communication which encumbers our public and commercial life today.

The only spelling reform which would create a substantial saving would be one so radical that I doubt if one could persuade a people as individualistic as the English to adopt

it. An attempt to introduce Spelling Reform by a Private Member's Bill in 1949 was outvoted in Parliament. Its most distinguished advocate is G. B. Shaw who has been prepared to place a considerable part of his fortune at the disposal of any responsible body capable of persuading the English to adopt a '40 letter British alphabet'. His case is compactly stated on a post card which he has circulated widely. With forty letters he suggests that we should have an adequately phonetic alphabet, that is an alphabet where a single and separate symbol represents each sound commonly in use. 'A 40 letter alphabet', Mr Shaw writes, 'providing one unambiguous symbol for each sound would save manual labor at the rate of 25 per cent per minute (131,400 per annum). Multiply this figure by the millions at every moment busy writing English somewhere in the world, and the total saving is so prodigious that the utmost cost of a change is negligible.'

Unfortunately Mr Shaw has not accompanied his proposals with any practical measures. He cannot use the decrees of an Ataturk so some other way must be sought. I have myself suggested to him that he should base his programme on a hundred years' plan seeking the Ministry of Education to introduce one new letter into the alphabet every five years. In this way the transition could be made without violence and indeed almost unnoticed. I have commented thus briefly on spelling reform for I would state a general sympathy with the advocates of these

methods, if not with all their proposals. If the spelling reformers would develop a programme to cover a century and if they were content with 'gradualism' I think most of our difficulties in spelling would be removed.

Other attempts have been made to simplify English by an artificial reduction of the number of words employed in the vocabulary. The most notable of these is Basic English (i.e. British, American, Scientific, International and Commercial) which was invented by C. K. Ogden as a universal, international auxiliary language. Official recognition has been given to Basic English following its advocacy by Mr Winston Churchill. On 9th March, 1944, Mr Churchill, then Prime Minister, stated in the House of Commons that a Committee of Ministers after hearing a considerable volume of evidence, had submitted a report which was approved in principle by His Majesty's Government.

Basic English is a brilliant attempt to cover the whole range of ideas required for simple intercourse by a vocabulary of 850 words, with the use of some additional words for professional and technical purposes. The copyright in this Basic standardized Word List and System has been vested in the Basic English Foundation. This body is a Charitable Trust whose purpose it is 'to propagate the teaching and study of Basic English as an international and educational medium and thereby to increase the knowledge of English among mankind'.¹

¹The Basic English Foundation has premises at 117 Piccadilly, London, W.1.

My own studies have convinced me of certain possibilities in Basic English as an international medium. But its aims are different from those which I am at present advocating. First, I suggest no artificial reduction of vocabulary, Secondly, I aim not only at clarity but at brevity. Basic English while it achieves intelligibility even for those who possess only its 850 words does not necessarily attain brevity. When the Prime Minister's statement on Basic English in the House of Commons was converted into Basic English, the original was not longer than the Basic version.¹

At the same time I suggest that no exercise is more valuable in establishing a clarity of diction than the translation of statements, experimentally, into Basic English. But Direct English, as I here outline it, admits no artificial restriction of vocabulary and in this way attains not only clarity but a brevity which Basic English cannot achieve.

H. G. Wells, in one of his rare passages of literary comment, gave an admirable impression of the strength and variety of English: 'the Gothic intricacy,' he wrote, 'the splash and glitter, the jar and recovery, the stabbing lights, the heights and broad distances of our English tongue'. This wealth of the English vocabulary has come first from our twelve centuries of continuous history, and secondly from our continuous genius for borrowing from the speech of all peoples with whom we have had contact. Greek, Latin, Scandinavian, French, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish,

¹See Official paper in *Basic English* (L. 3469/25/410).

Indian and American elements are all to be found in English along with many others. It is this great wealth of vocabulary that makes it possible in English to express so many fine shades of meaning and varieties of mood. The abundance offers temptations when the language is used for simple communication. That is why the exercise of Direct English becomes necessary.

It may be recalled that in *Our Mutual Friend*, Mr Podsnap, 'with a gracious consciousness of being always right', once said 'Our Language is Difficult. Ours is a Copious Language, and trying to Strangers'. Mr Podsnap, while thus emphasizing the range of the English vocabulary, was placing unfair stress on the difficulty of the language. For the extraordinary thing about English is that, despite all the richness and variety of its resources of words, most statements can be made with complete clarity with a very small vocabulary. This feature of English is one of its main virtues. It is one of the reasons why Direct English is possible. Elaborate phrasing in statements can usually on close scrutiny be broken down into briefer phrases with shorter words and all this with no loss of meaning or clarity. There may be some sacrifice of elegance, and of *style* and in literature the *emotive* content of a passage may be reduced. But in the types of statement necessary for business and government the reduction can be achieved without any loss whatsoever. Again the wealth of vocabulary in English, and the ease of the grammatical structure make a wholly

unnecessary elaboration of statement an ever-present temptation. It is this type of verbal inflation that Direct English is mainly attempting to abolish.

It will often be found that the simpler form contains words of English origin and that the elaborate form has words borrowed into English from foreign languages. In the following list, in the first column is given the word of English origin, in the second is a word of the same meaning of Romance origin, and in the third a word of Latin origin.¹

<i>English</i>	<i>Romance</i>	<i>Latin</i>
ask	enquire	interrogate
beat	scourge	flagellate
body	carcase, corpse	cadaver
body	company	corporation
body	substance	solidity
breach	fracture	chasm, disruption
breach	infringement	infraction, violation
breach	estrangement	difference
		dissension
		rupture
		schism
right	proper	appropriate
growth	herbage	vegetation
growth	stature	
growth	enlargement	development
	expansion	evolution

In all this I am far from stating that all English should be reduced to the simplest form or to Direct English. What I

¹This list is selected from the examples given by John Earle in *English Prose*, (1890).

do suggest is that in the first place thought governs language and that clear thought will lead to clear language. The writer must decide exactly his motive in writing, and on his motive will depend the nature of his vocabulary.

(i) If his motive is to communicate a statement or an instruction, he should use Direct English. He will have the virtue of lucidity and he will save time – his own, the typist's or the printer's and the time of all his readers.

(ii) If he wishes to deceive or if he wishes to protect himself from deception he may find himself using a more elaborate language. He ought at least to know why he is using it.

(iii) Literature as a language of description and persuasion and words as the medium of art will lead to the use of a vocabulary from all the resources which the language possesses.

As I have already suggested legal language is ultimately the language of the man who is attempting to protect himself from deception. He is attempting to make statements which cannot be interpreted even by a clever advocate except in the way in which he wishes them to be interpreted. This again leads to the language of Government regulations. Yet the problem of legal language is more complex than this and arises from our system of legislation by reference. A new Act will not be self-explanatory but will make statements in the terms of previous Acts. This legal circumlocution is, as I have already admitted, necessary as

long as our legal system remains as it is. In a healthy community, it could be argued, the people would understand the laws of the country. That is certainly not true in England today. I have indicated that in the same way some official statements are composed with the deliberate intention that their meaning should remain ambiguous.

I am not sure that the general public realize what degree of intelligibility is to be found in orders made by reference to previous orders in the manner favoured by lawyers. For instance an order issued in 1946 had at its close a note to say that by the order 'a launderer is no longer required to give notice to the Board of Trade if he intends to close down his business either temporarily or permanently'.

The order itself conveyed this news in the following manner:

The Laundry (Control) Order, 1942, as amended by the Laundry (Control) (No. 2) Order, 1942, shall have effect as if subparagraph (3) of paragraph 2 were omitted, and the Laundry (Control) (No. 2) Order, 1942, is hereby revoked.

Can any lawyer say why in this and hundreds of other instances the instructions to his Majesty's subjects could not be given in a language which his Majesty's subjects will understand without any professional help?

The whole problem was less important ten years ago before we were smothered in regulations and directives. If, however, we are to be governed by written instructions and

regulations the time has come when we, as a public, should demand that they be written in the best and the simplest English.

CHAPTER V

The Nature of Direct English (II): Suggestions for its Employment

The writing of Direct English, as I have already emphasized, cannot be achieved merely by learning a number of rules. But a number of general indications of the principles governing Direct English can be given. First, all clear writing depends on the clear arrangement of thought. If the thought has been exactly defined the language will inevitably be clear. If the thought remains uncertain in the mind of the writer its expression in words will inevitably be obscure. The most usual symptom that a writer is unhappy about the expression of a thought comes from his attempt to re-express it, sometimes even in the same paragraph. This repetition following inadequate statement is a frequent cause of tedious writing. Two half expressions of a thought do not equal one clear and full expression and they are usually more than twice as long. Precision of thought is the foremost and essential condition of clear writing.

Secondly considerable savings in length can be gained by the arrangement of a series of thoughts or statements in their proper sequence, so that related matters are brought together. Whenever this logical or orderly arrangement is

used the reduction in the number of words follows naturally as can be seen in the example given on page 32. This orderly arrangement is not difficult to achieve *with revision* though it may require an exceptional clarity of mind to set out thoughts in this way in a first draft. Unfortunately, as I stated in Chapter III, so many statements are dictated and left without revision that the reader is doubly penalized by having to read more words than is necessary and to read those in a muddled order. It will already have been seen from the examples I have quoted that these considerations which affect thought and the ordering of thought are the main causes of unnecessary length in commercial and governmental statements. If without any other change we could have thoughts clearly set out and logically arranged we could make substantial reductions in the length of memoranda and similar statements.

Closely related to this control of thought is the introduction of matter which is wholly unnecessary. Part of the meaning of every passage can be derived from the context. I have quoted a number of examples in Chapters II and III where I examine some typical advertisements, and extracts from Government publications. For instance one concern tells candidates that '*completed* application forms must be returned'. It is obvious to all candidates that they are not to return *uncompleted* forms and therefore the adjective can be omitted. Every passage should be examined to see that statements are not being made unnecessarily in this way.

The next group of reforms, which lead to the development of Direct English, deals with vocabulary. Frequently a whole clause or phrase is used where a single adjective would serve. Further each noun, adjective, and verb should be examined closely to see if the meaning cannot be supplied by a simpler word. So in the passage already quoted on page 41, we are told that treatment must take place in the home:

‘when the patient’s condition makes it essential for consultation or treatment to take place there’.

All the writer is attempting to say is that

‘the patient is too ill go to to hospital’.

I have already suggested that *remuneration*, *salary* and *wages* could all be reduced to the single word *pay*. Similarly *indisposition* in the same way as *the patient’s condition* is briefly rendered *illness*. I am prepared to believe that *medical practitioner* is a necessary term in legal documents but for all ordinary statements *doctor* supplies all that is required. It may well be that in literary English a phrase or a long word may add to the rhythm or the charm of a sentence. But in practical English this temptation should be avoided, especially when in ninety-nine instances out of a hundred the more elaborate expression will be an encumbrance without being beautiful.

Some of the elaboration of vocabulary has developed from a morbid, stylistic fear (encouraged by the writing of school essays) of repeating the same word too frequently in

a single passage. Again it may be that there are passages in which elegance and charm of movement are the main considerations and that here repetition should be avoided. But in prose written for practical purposes the repetition has the advantage of adding to the lucidity of the passage. The simple word *get* may not be very beautiful but it can often take the place of longer words, such as *procure* and *obtain*, without any ambiguity.

Closely allied to this translation of a vocabulary to its simplest form is the removal of all unnecessary words and phrases. Often these have little or no meaning. For instance the word *normally* occurs in two of the passages I have quoted in Chapter III.

(i) 'Thus, they *normally* incur considerable indirect expenditure over their transfer.'

The writer here means *always*. If he means *always* the context itself will supply the meaning fully by the simple statement, 'Thus, they incur considerable indirect expenditure over their transfer'. Clear thinking would lead him to consider when he wrote *normally* whether he had in mind any exceptions to his statement. If there were no exceptions (i.e. no *abnormal* instances) then the use of *normally* is not only unnecessary but erroneous.

(ii) The other example quoted in Chapter III reads 'The alternative of attendance at a hospital . . . should be the *normal* rule, and should be adopted unless medical considerations make it impossible'.

There is so much wrong with this passage that it is difficult to isolate the problem of *normal*. But clearly, even if no other change were to be made it can be omitted.

'The patient must attend at a hospital unless etc.'

Where a word or phrase is not making an active contribution to the meaning it should be deleted. Unfortunately numerous writers of official and business English feel that they are being effective if their sentences are long. In fact every long sentence should be suspect unless its length is justified by the amount of matter it conveys.

It should further be remembered that unnecessary length comes more frequently from verbs, adverbs and adjectives than from nouns. The student training himself in Direct English will do well to begin by examining the nouns in a passage as the problems they present are the simplest. If the same noun appears frequently in the passage a check should be made to see if the thought is orderly. A further check should be made on the longer nouns to see if they are necessary or if shorter ones could possibly be used. Frequently, however, it will be found that little reduction in the nouns is possible. When the verbs and adverbs are considered the situation is found to be very different. Often two verbs are used where one only is necessary. Adverbs are often mere 'padding' and can be deleted altogether.

Mr Ogden in his *Basic English* system of 850 words had 600 nouns (400 general nouns such as *addition*, *adjustment*

and 200 picture nouns such as *angle*, *ant*) and only 100 words for 'Operations', which cover pronouns, prepositions, and a number of miscellaneous words such as 'Yes', 'No', and verbs. This reduction is possible because he includes so few verbs. Indeed the only verbs he admits are: *come, get, give, go, keep, let, make, put, seem, take, am, do, have, say, see, send, may, will*. These words, Mr Ogden describes as 'operators' for they describe the essential operations. In fact Mr Ogden, in his table of Basic English words, states that it is possible to get the whole system of 850 words 'on the back of a bit of notepaper because there are no "verbs" in Basic English'.¹

With these 'operators' Mr Ogden is able to translate the more complicated verbs in English into simple phrases such as:

interject	=	put a word in
infuse	=	put the tea in
plant	=	put a seed in the earth

Now, it will be obvious from these examples that while simplicity has been gained, brevity has not been achieved. The simplicity was a primary consideration in Basic English which was intended to be a simplified form of English arranged for international communications. Direct English has a different aim. It is concerned with clear brevity. It has an international importance for it will make English easier to read and understand. But the primary aim of Direct

¹*Basic English*, by C. K. Ogden. 1930.

English is to make English more acceptable for English people; to make the task of Government more honest and intelligible and to make the life of the governed more tolerable.

At the same time the treatment of the verb in Basic English should be borne in mind by anyone attempting to practise Direct English. Every verb should be examined to see if a simpler word could be inserted and whether one of the operators indicated overleaf would not do all the work.

Of adjectives and adverbs I would state that they should always be suspect. They are often unnecessary and are used to fill out sentences which seem otherwise bare. Writers of official and business English too frequently feel that an adjective and a noun make a more dignified and sonorous combination than a simple noun and in this way we have *medical practitioners* for *doctors*.

Beyond these general principles there are a number of devices which can be used legitimately to shorten statements. In instructions, for instance, 'he or she' which is cumbersome can often be overcome by the use of the plural 'they'. Further it is often more economical of space to use the plural rather than the singular of nouns, as the plural does not require the definite article. So (see page 42):

'the doctor decides that *the patient* must
can read

'the doctor decides that *patients* must .

This group of economies is in the nature of a device rather than of a general principle and is only of minor importance.

The reader of this chapter may well argue that Direct English contains no novelty. It merely argues for a clear and logical expression and an examination of vocabulary to see that this is in the simplest terms. Exactly! As I have already stated I am not advocating an artificial treatment of language. I am not the apostle of some strange or eccentric system. Where then does my plea lie? It is that Direct English can be achieved by anyone in business or official life today, but this cannot be done without training. Even practised writers will find at first that it is a difficult mental exercise to reduce a diffuse statement into a compact statement in Direct English.

Nor would I suggest that Direct English should be employed on all occasions. By all means let private communications be written easily and if necessarily lazily. Further let literature follow its own paths, and justify itself by its own conclusions. But where documents have to be read by a hundred thousand people it is of major importance whether the statement is of 500 or 1000 words. For there is a possible saving of fifty million words of reading time. I would include here a passage from an address which John Morley once gave to students 'On the Study of Literature': 'It is not everybody who can command the mighty rhythm of the greatest masters of human speech. But every one can make reasonably sure that he knows what he means, and

whether he has found the right word.'

While the main principles of Direct English are simple enough, I am convinced that if these were widely employed in our national life we could supplement them with devices which would develop with experience and would further reduce the length of official orders and memoranda. At present our difficulty is that no University or Institute concerns itself with this which is one of the great problems of our national life. Discussion on the simplification of language has all too often been conducted in England as if it were a humorous matter. I admit that all who wish to use artificiality in treating the language deserve to be subject to the criticism of the Comic Spirit. But by systematically dealing with the simplification of English through Direct English we can save money, save time, and make business easier and more honest.

CHAPTER VI

The Use of Simple and Direct English in Literature

While in literature the writer will often use an elaborate vocabulary for a number of varying motives, much that is most effective even in literary writing has been composed in simple or Direct English. In fact the original meaning of 'prose' is 'direct speech' from the Latin *prosa* ('straight' or 'direct') and *oratio* ('speech'). This Direct English is based mainly on the simple sentence and it has remained very similar in its movement from the Anglo-Saxon period onwards.

In using the term 'simple sentence' I am not implying the term in its grammatical sense of a sentence without subordinate clauses. Often Direct English is mainly sustained by simple sentences even in this strictly grammatical sense. I mean here rather a *simple* way of writing in that the words are in their natural order, and each word is the shortest that will serve while nothing has been added solely for the sake of balance or decoration. It is the way of writing often employed by masters of prose who, having a passage of thought or narrative to convey, are not allowing any conscious conception of rhetoric or emphasis to stand in between the thought or narrative and the reader. Further,

examples of such writing can be found in every period of English prose. They belong to something basic and subject to little change in the language, while fashion may be affecting the movement and vocabulary of more elaborate writing.

For instance, King Alfred in translating Orosius embodied into his narrative an account which had been given to him orally by Ohthere of his journey to the northernmost Norse settlements. In his translations Alfred is guided by his originals but here he is free of any outside influence. This passage is therefore his own prose and it has an unpretentious and natural movement which must have been very much like the conversational prose of that period:

'Ohthere said to his Lord, Alfred, the King, that he of all Northmen, dwelt in the northernmost place. He said that he dwelt in that north land towards the West Sea. He said, nevertheless, that there was land very much further north from there. But it was all uninhabited, except that here and there dwelt Laplanders by hunting in winter, and in summer by fishing in the sea. He said that he on one occasion wished to discover how far northwards the land lay or whether anyone dwelt to the north of the uninhabited place. Then he went northwards along the land. He left all the way the uninhabited land on the starboard and the open sea on the port for three days. Then he was as far north as the whale-hunters farthest go.'

In rendering this passage I have merely modernized the vocabulary. The word order and the phrasing of the sen-

tences I have kept as close as possible to the language of the original. This prose, as far as its movement is concerned, has no marks which assign it to any particular period. It obeys in a modest and effective way the most natural idiom of the language. It could not be more briefly and more clearly expressed.

This prose, which Alfred used before the year 900 to describe a journey, is identical in its movement and arrangement with the prose that more than eight hundred years later Jonathan Swift was to employ in the opening of *Gulliver's Travels*:

'My father had a small Estate in Nottinghamshire; I was the Third of Five Sons. He sent me to Emanuel-College in Cambridge, at Fourteen Years old, where I resided three Years, and applied my self close to my Studies: But the Charge of maintaining me (although I had a very scanty Allowance) being too great for a narrow Fortune; I was bound Apprentice to Mr James Bates, an eminent Surgeon in London, with whom I continued four Years; and my Father now and then sending me small Sums of Money, I laid them out in learning Navigation, and other Parts of the Mathematicks, useful to those who intend to travel, as I always believed it would be some time or other my Fortune to do.'

This passage could not be reduced by a single word and it has complete clarity. The matter itself gives the narrative its liveliness and interest. Both passages use a *loose* structure where one phrase or sentence is added to another without any attempt at an elaborate pattern or balance. English

lends itself readily to this easy, cumulative effect.

In between King Alfred and Swift, prose had had a complex history in which numerous types of most elaborate diction had been employed. The basis of the simple prose, however, remains and it is on that simple sentence that the English language is ultimately constructed. Examples of a similar way of writing, employed with varying skill according to the genius of the individual writer, could be found in any one of the intervening centuries.

Francis Bacon, writing in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, was a master of prose who employed a number of elaborate embellishments in vocabulary and balanced arrangements of clauses when his purposes needed them. Yet Bacon, when he wishes to write a straightforward and unpretentious narrative in the opening of *The New Atlantis* falls back on a simple manner, identical with that of King Alfred and of Swift.

‘We sailed from Peru,’ Bacon writes, ‘where we had continued for the space of one whole year, for China and Japan, by the South Sea, taking with us victuals for twelve months, and had good winds from the east, though soft and weak, for five months’ space and more; and then the wind came about, and settled in the west for many days, so as we could make little or no way, and were sometimes in purpose to turn back.’

Bacon is less effective in his simple prose than he was in some of his more elaborate styles. He misses the alertness which in Swift beckons the reader on from one sentence to

another. Swift contrives, for instance, to avoid conditioning phrases (such as Bacon's 'though soft and weak') which hold up the easy movement of the passage. Yet basically it is the same, natural and simple and direct style that he is using.

It will be found that the simple prose will vary in the strength of its effect according to the degree of thought which it contains and also according to the rhythm which accompanies the sentence. If the thought is profound, surprising or attractive, it is possible for the simple sentence, devoid of any embellishment of vocabulary or pleasing movement of phrase, to make a very strong impression upon the mind. For instance, such an effect can be found in the statement made by Vanzetti, the Italian-American Communist, in the room where he was electrocuted. Vanzetti is reported to have said:¹

"“I wish to tell you that I am an innocent man. I never committed any crime, but sometimes some sin.” (to the Warder) “Thank you for everything you have done for me. I am innocent of all crime – not only this one – but all crime. I am an innocent man. I wish to forgive *some* people for what they are now doing to me.””

It is obvious that the man who spoke these words had an incomplete knowledge of the English language. Yet these simple sentences which preserve the straight forward order of prose have an effect upon the mind stronger than many of those which an elaborate rhetoric can produce. Style can

¹*Letters of Saccho and Vanzetti*, ed. U. D. Frankfurter.

never be an effective substitute for thought. Style and thought should be one organic unit. But even where the style is inadequate if the thought be arresting the impression on the reader will be immediate and profound as long as the words are simple.

While the simple sentence can possess an effect derived largely from its subject, some conscious care for the rhythm of the words in the sentence and the structure of the paragraph can assist in creating an impression stronger than any single sentence could produce. One of the earliest passages of this kind is to be found in the concluding paragraphs of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, where the Peterborough monk laments over the miseries of the reign of Stephen. A version in modern English was quoted by W. P. Ker in his introduction to Henry Craik's *English Prose*:¹

'Was never yet more wretchedness in the land, nor ever did the heathen men worse than these men did. For never anywhere did they spare either church or churchyard, but took all the wealth that was therein, and afterwards burned the church and all together. Nor did they forbear from bishops' lands, or abbots', or priests', but plundered monks and clerks, and every man another, wherever he might. If two men or three came riding to a township, all fled before them and took them for robbers. The bishops and priests cursed them continually, but they took no heed of that, for they were all accursed utterly, and forsworn, and cast away.

¹*English Prose*. Vol. I, page 9, edited by Henry Craik, 1893.

'Wheresoever there was tillage, the earth would bear no corn, for the land was wasted with such deeds; and they said openly that Christ slept and his saints. Such and more than we can say we endured nineteen years for our sins.'

This is far more elaborate than King Alfred's account of Ohthere's voyage, an example of which is quoted earlier in this chapter. In addition to the statement of fact the writer of the passage now considered is resolved to give an impression of the hardship of the period, and he accumulates phrases in order to increase the effect. His methods are effective and unpretentious but they have gone beyond the first degree of simplicity. One verb would have stated the fact, but the phrase 'they were all *accursed* utterly, and *forsworn*, and *cast away*' is in addition to stating the fact creating deliberately an emotional effect. Apart from the effective use of detail and some bold phrasing ('they said openly that Christ slept and his saints') the passage gains greatly by its rhythmical movement. There is a pleasure in its sombre movement and this in turn expresses the mood that is being conveyed.

Some critics long denied this similarity between early English prose and modern prose based upon the possibilities of simple expression made available by the natural idiom of the language. For instance, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch was not alone when he affirmed: 'From Anglo-Saxon Prose, from Anglo-Saxon Poetry, our living Prose

and Poetry have, save linguistically, no derivation'.¹ This comment arises from the fact that Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, and many other critics in thinking of prose concentrate on the more elaborate embellishments which a self-conscious literary style can produce. They did not give due attention to the simpler forms of the language, which remain there permanently, and ever ready for use. W. P. Ker realized this and indicated that there was a basic similarity between the Anglo-Saxon prose in its simplest forms and modern English. For instance he had noted that Alfred's passage on the voyages of Ohthere and Wulfstan was quoted nearly seven hundred years later in the Elizabethan period by Hakluyt in his collection of *Navigations* and he had commented: 'It was a happy inspiration that gave Ohthere and Wulfstan their place in Hakluyt's collection; and indeed many of Hakluyt's men are more old-fashioned in their style and carry more rhetorical top-hamper than Ohthere'.²

The thesis that there has been a continuous tradition of a simple English prose was developed in a more detailed and authoritative way by R. W. Chambers in his introduction to Nicholas Harpsfield's *Life of Sir Thomas More*.³ Chambers successfully combated the view that English prose had

¹"On the Lineage of English Literature", in *The Art of Writing*, 1923, p. 163.

²Craik, *English Prose Selections*, Vol. I.

³*The life and death of Sir Thomas More, knight, sometymes Lord High Chancellor of England*, by Nicholas Harpsfield, ed. Elsie V. Hitchcock, (Early English Text Society, 1932).

disappeared with the Norman Conquest and demonstrated an uninterrupted stream of life from Alfred to the sixteenth century. The prose that survived was often a prose that had the unpretentious purposes of giving information or of outlining religious discipline.

It is for that reason that its writers were content to rely upon the natural and simple idiom of the language. One of the works to which R. W. Chambers attached greatest importance is the *Ancren Riwe*, (*The Rule of the Anchoresses*), which was a Rule written for three young maidens of gentle birth who had withdrawn from the world into cells by the wall of a church. According to Chambers the Rule itself was revised for a larger community apparently about the year 1230. Much in the *Ancren Riwe* belongs to the duller tradition of the simple prose, clear but in an uninteresting way. But it still does preserve the virtues of lucidity and of honest expression. Such a passage, one of many in the volume, is quoted by Chambers:

‘Much word is there of you, what gentle women ye be; for your goodness and for your nobleness of mind beloved of many; sisters, of one father and of one mother, in the flower of your youth, ye have left all worldly joys, and become anchoresses.’

The writer, further, is able from time to time to draw upon the natural rhythm of the language and to give to his simple prose some of those virtues of strength and liveliness which have already been described. Chambers gives as an example

of this 'astonishing power' the description of the backbiter, :

'He casts down his head, and begins to sigh before he says a word; then he talks around the subject for a long time with a sorrowful countenance, to be the better believed: "Alas, well-away, woe is me, that he (or she) has fallen into such repute. Enough did I try, but I could do no good herein. It is long ago that I knew of it; but nevertheless it should never have been betrayed by me; but now that it is so widely known through others, I cannot gainsay it. They say that it is bad; and yet it is worse than they say. Grieved and sorry I am that I must say it; but in truth it is so, and that is a great grief. For many other things he (or she) is greatly to be praised; but not for these, and woe is me therefore. No one can defend them."''

How much easier would life be if modern commercial and official communications could be written in the simple and vivid style which the author of the *Ancren Riwe* had mastered over seven hundred years ago.

I am not suggesting that all the purposes of language can be kept within this simple language. It is, above all, an instrument for making statements, describing actions and such elements of thought as do not require a technical vocabulary. As soon as one departs from these purposes and aims at a rhetorical effect or at persuasion, introspection, analysis or the depiction of emotion, then other resources of vocabulary and of pattern within the sentence will be called into service. With some of these I deal in later chapters.

The impressiveness of simple speech is its very nakedness as if it threw over to the action or to the thought the burden of making an impression. 'I am the great I am.' Nothing can, from a linguistic point of view, be simpler than this brief sentence of monosyllabic words, and yet they explore the uttermost fields of metaphysical and religious speculation. Similarly, to quote the English translation of the Bible in its narrative style, what can for the opening of a story be more adequate than the simple and direct introductory sentence: 'A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead'.

It will be seen from this and the earlier examples I have quoted that where this simple prose departs from the grammatically simple sentence it does so in a way that each part of the sentence is a separate link in the development of the narrative. Thus the passage from the *New Testament* could be made into a series of simple sentences without affecting the meaning or order of the words. 'A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. He fell among thieves. They stripped him of his raiment. They wounded him. They departed leaving him half dead.' This is only possible because the original style preserved a natural word-order.

John Bunyan in *Pilgrim's Progress* contrived to make a prose of absolute simplicity from his study of the

Bible and the fresh, strong phrases that circulated in the conversation of his time. Bunyan's prose has often been praised, though never more emphatically than by Lord Macaulay, who was himself a master in another manner. 'The style of Bunyan', Macaulay wrote, 'is delightful to every reader and invaluable as a study to every person who wishes to obtain a wide command of the English language. The vocabulary is the vocabulary of the common people. There is not an expression, if we except a few technical terms of theology, which would puzzle the rudest peasant. We have observed several pages which do not contain a single word of more than two syllables. Yet no writer has said more exactly what he meant to say. For magnificence, for pathos, for vehement exhortation, for subtle disquisition, for every purpose of the poet, the orator and the divine, this homely dialect, the dialect of plain working men, was perfectly sufficient. There is no book in our literature in which we would so readily stake the fame of the old unpolluted English language, no book which shows so well how rich that tongue is in its own proper wealth, and how little it has been improved by all that it has borrowed.'

It can be justly urged that the conclusion of Macaulay's passage of praise is an exaggeration, for there are some interesting effects in prose which the plain or direct style cannot reach. Yet, as he notes, Bunyan is lively, imaginative and powerful with the simplest resources. I quote only a few lines where Bunyan is effective with the

barest vocabulary: 'The Neighbours also came out to see him run, and as he ran some mocked, others threatened; and some cried after him to return. And among those that *did* so, there were two that were resolved to fetch him back by force, and the name of the one was *Obstinate*, and the name of the other *Pliable*.'¹ Sir Charles Firth has noted² that while part of Bunyan's style comes from biblical prose much of its most vivid quality, especially in the dialogue, is derived from the everyday language of the seventeenth-century workman or shopkeeper, 'which was a much more homely and less dignified dialect than the language of the Bible'. So when Bunyan describes the pilgrims as they reach the top of the hill called Difficulty he writes, 'they were very willing to sit down, for they were all in a petting heat'. 'Petting' here is a dialect word meaning 'to skin' or 'to fleece'. Again Christian describing the House of Talkative comments that it is 'as empty of religion as the white of an egg is of savour', and Old Mr Honest is described by Great-Heart with an image which comes from cock-fighting as 'a cock of the right kind'.

While Bunyan and a number of other writers have been able to strengthen a simple and direct style with conversational words and phrases, there yet remains a great difference between the style and manner of the written and spoken word.

¹*Pilgrim's Progress* (Oxford University Press), 1900. P. 13.

²*Essays, Historical and Literary* (Oxford University Press), 1938. Pp. 150-151.

The theme is far too large to explore fully. I would only say that written and spoken English are in the modern periods so far apart that they almost constitute two different languages. By spoken English I mean conversational English. Some writers have attempted to imitate conversation but they still rely on a series of conventions. Much conversational English is carried on successfully without any use of the sentence as a unit. Students of language have paid very little attention to the nature of colloquial speech in English. The radio at times attempts to use colloquial speech for purposes of mass communication and this may in time affect the style of the written language. In later chapters¹ some observations are made on political oratory, but this is a formal type of the spoken word which approximates to written speech.

Dickens captured something of this concentrated allusiveness of the spoken language. He realized that often in conversation a single word will do the work of a sentence. In *Dombey and Son*² in the visit of Captain Cuttle to Mr Gills, the single word 'The' expresses the whole of his meaning.

"How goes it?" asks Captain Cuttle.

"All well," said Mr Gills, pushing the bottle towards him.

He took it up, and having surveyed and smelt it, said with extraordinary expression.

¹See Chapters IX & X.

²Chapter IV.

“The?”

“The,” returned the instrument-maker.

Upon that he whistled as he filled his glass, and seemed to think they were making holiday indeed.’

‘The’ we discover from the text is a ‘wonderful Madeira, a very ancient-looking bottle, covered with dust and dirt’.

Dickens, like G. B. Shaw, had a very subtle ear and had studied the mysteries of the spoken word. He often gives an imitation of them in the dialogue of his novels. So in *Bleak House* he gives an imitation of the idiom of the spoken word of Mr Tangle:

‘The Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery asks Mr Tangle if he has finished his argument and Mr Tangle replies:

“Mlud, no – variety of points – feel it my duty to submit – ludship.”’

So swallowing half his words and deleting others Mr Tangle still makes himself intelligible as a speaker.

The spoken language has a vivacity all its own. Let me quote, as reported in the *Daily Mail* of 25th June, 1948, the opinion given by ‘the losing beauty queen spokesman’ of her successful competitor whom she thought had won by an unfair management of the contest:

‘Of course she’s pretty. We all like her, but fair’s fair.’ There is the spoken word, in all its rapidity and liveliness.

In the spoken language sentences are left unfinished, words are omitted, and the speaker trusts his hearer to guess the half of the meaning that is left unexpressed. Fur-

ther, even fastidious speakers use a different vocabulary for speaking and for writing. The spoken word, as used in conversation, has seldom been studied by the students of language in English. If there were an English language Institute this is one of the problems which should be explored.

Direct English, as I am here considering it, is the written language in its simplest form, but with complete sentences, and a grammatical structure. Some critics have told me that I am unjust in comparing Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* with Government memoranda. Anyone, they suggest, can be simple in a story and no one can be simple in an official document. Such a comment could only be made by those who have never attempted to write narrative. It is far more difficult to make a passage of description simple and clear than it is to draft a simple and clear memorandum. Swift showed in his political pamphlets that he could write in the same simple manner on controversial themes as he used in *Gulliver's Travels*. The vocabulary in a memorandum will be different from the vocabulary in a narrative, or story, but the same principles will apply if the writer is to compose a memorandum in Direct English and a narrative in simple or Direct English.

The power of a simple language, adequately supported by thought, can be seen by the fact that even in verse it can attain an effect which is unequalled either by any form of imagery or by rhetorical effects. Thus, for instance, Shake-

speare, who had a command of all the resources of language employed on more than one occasion a simple and almost monosyllabic language in order to obtain the most poignant effects. An outstanding example is the well-known speech in which King Lear, coming through from his mental affliction greets his daughter Cordelia:

‘Pray do not mock me:

I am a very foolish fond old man,
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more or less;
And to speak plainly
I fear I am not in my perfect mind
Methinks I should know you, and know this man;
Yet I am doubtful: for I am mainly ignorant
What place this is; and all the skill I have
Remembers not these garments; nor I know not
Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me;
For, as I am a man, I think this lady
To be my child Cordelia.’¹

Here the natural word order is maintained. The vocabulary is mainly monosyllabic and yet the final impression is stronger than could have been obtained by any employment of metaphor or of imagery. The *Lear* passage belongs to the tradition of a simple style, which gains its effect from the occasion on which it is employed. Part of the impressiveness of its simplicity lies in the contrast of this passage with the torrential and highly imaginative language which Lear has employed in earlier speeches.

The examples I have quoted show that there are many

¹*Lear*, v. 1.

degrees of attractiveness in simple prose. It may be clear but dull, and on the other hand it can become a prose of power, and still retain its simple lucidity. All will depend on the quality of the mind and the interest of the matter to be related. So, for instance, Nelson and Wellington, who both had intelligence of a first order, wrote with supreme simplicity. Nelson was more emotional and personal and his prose is often most moving, while Wellington was Olympian, and aloof, but he had a magnificent control of the prose medium. I would quote first from the letter that Nelson wrote to Lady Hamilton before Trafalgar:

Victory, October 19th, 1805.

Noon.

Cadiz. E.S.E. 16 Leagues

My dearest beloved Emma, the dear friend of my bosom. The signal has been made that the enemy's Combined Fleet are coming out of Port. We have very little wind, so that I have no hopes of seeing them before tomorrow. May the God of Battles crown my endeavours with success; at all events, I will take care that my name shall ever be most dear to you and Horatia, both of whom I love as much as my own life. And as my last writing before the Battle will be of you, so I hope in God that I shall live to finish my letter after the battle. May heaven bless you
prays your Nelson and Bronte.

I have often been impressed by the clarity of the prose written by sailors, even when they have not Nelson's genius. I have wondered if it arises from the fact that their profession demands that they should describe certain things with

exact precision. So in Nelson's letter: 'Victory, October 19th, 1805. Noon. Cadiz. E.S.E. 16 Leagues.' There is a style that comes from a man who can make mistakes in such matters only with fatal results. Nelson, the romantic and emotional, does allow himself in the letter itself a larger and more rhetorical gesture: 'May the God of Battles crown my endeavours with success'.

With this I would put the last prayer which Nelson wrote before Trafalgar in his private diary. He writes here with a rather more formal gesture than in the language of his letter to Lady Hamilton, but the vocabulary is still simple and there is a complete lucidity in the gracious and moving sentences:

'May the Great God whom I worship grant to my Country and for the benefit of Europe in general, a great and glorious victory; and may no misconduct in anyone tarnish it; and may humanity after victory be the predominant feature of the British Fleet. For myself, individually, I commit my life to Him who made me, and may His blessing light upon my endeavours for serving my Country faithfully. To him I resign myself and the just cause which is entrusted to me to defend. Amen. Amen. Amen.'¹

Wellington, whose true greatness the British, who owe him so much, never fully conceded, did not so easily reveal his emotions. He was a master in his use of simple English in which he makes liberal use of colloquial elements. So

¹Both passages are quoted from *The Life of Nelson* by A. T. Mahan, vol. II, 1898.

in a letter to Lord Beresford dated '2nd July, 1815' he describes the Battle of Waterloo:

My dear Beresford,

I have received your letter of the 9th of June. You should recommend for the Spanish medal for ^{the}Albuera, according to the rules laid down by the King of Spain for the grant of it. I should think it should be given only to those who were there and actually engaged.

I am, as soon as I shall have a little time, going to recommend officers for the Order of San Fernando, and will apply to you for a Portuguese list.

You will have heard of our battle of the 18th [Waterloo]. Never did I see such a pounding match. Both were what the boxers call gluttons. Napoleon did not manoeuvre at all. He just moved forward in the old style, in columns, and was driven off in the old style. The only difference was, that he mixed cavalry with his infantry, and supported both with an enormous quantity of artillery.

I had the infantry for some time in squares, and we had the French cavalry walking about us as if they had been our own. I never saw the British infantry behave so well. Boney is now off, I believe, to Rochefort, to go to America. The army, about 40,000, or 50,000 are in Paris. Blücher on the left of the Seine, and I with my right in front of St Denis and the left upon the Bois de Bondy. They have fortified St Denis and Montmartre very strongly. The Canal de l'Ourcq is filled with water, and they have a parapet and batteries on the bank; so that I do not believe we can attack this line. However I will see.

Not a word could be dropped from this masterly letter without some loss of meaning. It is the vigour and clarity

of Wellington's intelligence that gives power to this simple narrative.

Thus it appears that while Direct English should be the ~~best~~ method of honest communication of information in business and government, its place in literature is considerable, and through its medium some of the greatest effects of all are obtained.

CHAPTER VII

The more elaborate use of English: The classical style

While the direct and simple language has existed from the earliest times there are examples from the Anglo-Saxon period onwards of attempts at more elaborate styles. To some extent these can be grouped historically though in this way too regular and consistent a picture can easily be drawn. The genius of the English language is such that on the basis of a central simplicity it will permit, through sentence structure and the richness of its vocabulary, many and complex variations. Often these are personal to the writer himself, and some of these individual efforts are examined in later chapters. Meanwhile there is a fairly clear and historical contrast between a simple and direct English, based largely on the natural and colloquial style, and a more elaborate style deriving, though often indirectly, from Latin.

The clearest distinction between these two styles lies in the nature of the sentence structure itself. For in the simple or native manner the sentence will be 'loosely' constructed while the classical style will have a consciously developed pattern in the sentence or 'period'. The natural genius of the language as an uninflected speech leads to the 'loose

structure' where clause is added to clause, and where a 'full stop' could be put at the end of any one clause and yet a complete grammatical unity would be attained. The passage already quoted from *Gulliver's Travels*¹ is an example of this 'loose' structure at its most effective.

The classical style in its purest form is based on a sentence from which no part can be omitted without leaving the grammatical structure incomplete. The 'loose' style is *amorphous* and the 'classical' style is *organic*. Enough has already been said to indicate that the use of these terms does not signify that the simple style is in any way inferior, nor in its more effective forms is it any easier to write. The main aim of the classical style is to insert the pattern of the inflected sentence into an uninflected language. In an inflected language such a pattern is essential for syntax or the indication of the grammatical relationship of different parts of the sentence. In the uninflected language it is employed as an elegance and an embellishment. The main influence in English from an inflected language has come through Latin, and most of the masters of the periodic style are influenced by Latin, usually in a conscious way.

While the nature of sentence structure marks the fundamental difference between the simple, or 'loose' style and the 'periodic', the two styles are most usually also marked by a contrast in vocabulary. The 'periodic' style necessarily calls for a more elaborate vocabulary and many of its prac-

¹See page 67.

titioners, as they have been familiar with Latin, have called upon the classical elements in our speech to meet their necessities. Yet the classical style can be written, though with difficulty, in simple words and the association of an elaborate vocabulary with a classical style must be regarded as incidental rather than as imperative.

That the classical style is a studied elegance consciously imposed on the language can be seen by the recognition found in many of its practitioners that another and simpler way of writing is possible. A generous admission of this major difference between the natural or 'loose' construction and the complex or 'periodic' is to be found in a passage in Samuel Johnson's *Life of Dryden*. Johnson was one of the supreme masters in English of the 'periodic' manner but he had a great understanding of the English language in all its forms, and sufficient objectivity in his criticism, particularly in the later years of his life, to recognize the existence and the virtues of another type of writing in Dryden. Compared with the prose of Swift the prose of Dryden is complex. At the same time the aim of Dryden's prose was to remove the elaborations present in the prose of the generation that preceded him. He wished to bring into English some of the sociable quality of French prose. Especially in the Prefaces, he wrote in the later years of his life a prose that had an engaging informality. All this Johnson fully understood. So Johnson wrote:

'Criticism, either didactic or defensive, occupies almost

all his prose, except those pages which he has devoted to his patrons; but none of his prefaces were ever thought tedious. They have not the formality of a settled style, in which the first half of the sentence betrays the other. The clauses are never balanced, nor the periods modelled: every word seems to drop by chance, though it falls into its proper place. Nothing is cold or languid; the whole is airy, animated, and vigorous; what is little, is gay; what is great, is splendid. He may be thought to mention himself too frequently; but, while he forces himself upon our esteem, we cannot refuse him to stand high in his own. Every thing is excused by the play of images, and the sprightliness of expression. Though all is easy, nothing is feeble: though all seems careless, there is nothing harsh: and though since his earlier works more than a century has passed, they have nothing yet uncouth or obsolete.'

Johnson adds a little later in his *Life* that Dryden's 'style could not easily be imitated, either seriously or ludicrously; for, being always equable and always varied, it has no prominent or discriminative characters'. It would be seen from the above that Johnson in the first place recognized the merit of a simple and direct style. At the same time he could define his own way of writing as a style where the clauses are balanced and the periods modelled. He knew that his own way of writing led to the 'formality of a settled style'. It was a style which he used so persistently that he could employ it in conversation as easily as in writing, but he knew all its limitations as well as its possibilities, and the Dryden passage shows that he knew it to be an elaboration imposed on the simple genius of the language.

S. T. Coleridge, though his prose admits of many variations, also practised a classical manner, and being like Johnson a critic of some acuteness he was able to describe what he was doing. Commenting on his prose in one of his letters¹ he wrote: 'Habits of abstruse and continuous thought and the almost exclusive perusal of the Greek Historians and Philosophers, of the German Metaphysicians and Moralists, and of our English writers from Edward VI, to James II, have combined to render my sentences more *piled up* and *architectural* than is endurable in so illogical an age as the present, in which all the cements of style are dismissed, and a popular book is only a sequence of epigrams and aphorisms on one subject. Too often Readers may justly complain of involution and *entortillage* in my style.'

Some examples of a classical style could be found in the prose of Aelfric in the Anglo-Saxon period. But in more modern English the first clear examples are to be found late in the sixteenth century in the prose of John Lyly's *Euphues*. Lyly has often been described as an imitator of the Spanish stylist Guevara, and he must have been aware of some of the imitations of Guevara that were current in English. At the same time the element of balance in his style is something fundamental to any conscious effort at elaborate writing and if Lyly's debts are to be precisely estimated they must be found as much in Greek prose rhetoric and in the Latin rhetoric of Cicero as in the Spanish of Guevara.

¹*Unpublished Letters*, vol. II, pp. 10-11.

Lyly uses the balanced structure of the classical style, though he also employs additional embellishments. He uses an elaborate method of alliteration in order to emphasize the balance in the phrases, and he uses a sort of unnatural Natural History in his similes. Yet if the structure of Lyly's sentences is considered as distinct from these casual decorations it will be discovered that he is employing a structure and pattern of sentence not unlike that which Johnson himself two centuries later was to employ:

'My good Fidus, if the increasing of my sorrows might mitigate the extremity of thy sickness, I could be content to resolve myself into tears to rid thee of trouble: but the making of a fresh wound in my body is nothing to the healing of a festered sore in thy bowels: for that such diseases are to be cured in the end, by the names of their original. For as by basil the scorpion is engendered and by the means of the same herb destroyed: so love which by time and fancy is bred in an idle head, is by time and fancy banished from the heart: or as the salamander which, being a long space nourished in the fire, at last quencheth it, so affection having taken hold of the fancy, and living as it were in the mind of the lover, in tract of time altereth and changeth the heat, and turneth it to chillness.'¹

Lyly in passages such as this seems to be using the pattern of the sentence with a mathematical precision. Prose has ceased to be an instrument and has become instead a complex game. The words as if on parade draw attention to themselves instead of being as in a simpler form modestly in the service of the meaning.

¹*English Prose*, vol. I, pp. 379-380, edited by Henry Craik, 1893.

John Milton, the poet, wrote prose in Latin and in English and the pattern of the Latin sentence dominated his own writing in English. Further Milton had a complex mind that always saw the necessity of qualifying each thought so that the simple statement became overlaid with modifying phrases. Critics of Milton's prose have emphasised the classical influence. They have done less justice to this intricate nature of his mind which made some sort of involved expression inevitable. As with all other writers thought was the element that first conditioned his prose. It was his classical training that led to the fact that his particular type of complicated style was in the classical pattern. Sometimes an eloquence would set his style on fire so that the cumbersome dross was burned out, and a frequent quotation of such passages has possibly given him a reputation as a prose writer which he does not genuinely possess.

Such outstanding passages are to be found mainly in the *Areopagitica*:

'Many a man lives a burden to the earth; but a good book is the precious life-blood of a master-spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life.'

or

'Truth indeed came once into the world with her divine master, and was a perfect shape most glorious to look on: but when he ascended, and his apostles after him were laid asleep, then straight arose a wicked race of deceivers,

who as the story goes of the Egyptian Typhon with his conspirators, how they dealt with the good Osiris, took the virgin Truth, hewed her lovely form into a thousand pieces, and scattered them to the four winds. From that time ever since the sad friends of Truth, such as durst appear, imitating the careful search that Isis made for the mangled body of Osiris, went up and down gathering up limb by limb still as they could find them. We have not yet found them all, lords and commons, nor ever shall do, till her Master's second coming; he shall bring together every joint and member, and shall mould them into an immortal feature of loveliness and perfection.'

The famous passages such as these are exceptional in Milton's prose. Usually he writes in an over-elaborate way, allowing his mind to be burdened by the intricate sentence structure in which he tries to accommodate the complexities of his thought. I will quote in illustration one sentence which is an example of his average style. He is replying to a pamphleteering opponent who has accused him of having led a riotous life in the University:

'For which commodious life, that he may be encouraged in the trade another time, I thank him; for it hath given me an apt occasion to acknowledge publicly with all grateful mind, that more than ordinary favour and respect, which I found above any of my equals at the hands of those courteous and learned men, the fellows of that college wherein I spent some years: who at my parting, after I had taken two degrees, as the manner is, signified many ways how much better it would content them that I would stay; as by many letters full of kindness and loving respect,

sidered, however frequent, not as habitual corruptions, or settled practices, but as casual failures, and single lapses. A man who has from year to year set his country to sale, either for the gratification of his ambition or resentment confesses that the heat of party now and then betrays the severest virtue to measures that cannot be seriously defended. He that spends his days and nights in riot and debauchery, owns that his passions oftentimes overpower his resolutions. But each comforts himself that his faults are not without precedent, for the best and the wisest men have given way to the violence of sudden temptations.¹

The first sentence here is a clear, if rather heavy, example of the balanced sentence. The whole structure of the sentence turns on the two words 'As', and 'so', and through them the two sides of the sentence are bound together as two leaves in a book. The whole matter of Johnson's sentence could be expressed more briefly. His elaborate style constitutes a certain complex pleasure in words and in their movements.

Johnson is fully aware of what he is doing as his passage on Dryden's style shows. He is conscious at the same time of his own temperamental delight in the more sonorous movements in a sentence and of a brave rotundity in polysyllabic words. Literature was an occupation for the learned and for gentlemen and there was no need to make concessions to those who could not follow an elaborate piece of writing. He was unprepared to seek the same degree of simplicity as Swift advocated and practised, partly

¹*The Rambler*: No. 28.

perhaps because he had a personal dislike for Swift and his philosophy. So in one of his *Idler* essays he writes:

“Every man,” says Swift, “is more able to explain the subject of an art than its professors: a farmer will tell you in two words, that he has broken his leg; but a surgeon, after a long discourse, shall leave you as ignorant as you were before.” This could only have been said by such an exact observer of life, in gratification of malignity or in ostentation of acuteness.’

In the same essay he makes a defence of his own elaborate way of writing and of the use of ‘hard’ words:

‘If an author be supposed to involve his thoughts in voluntary obscurity, and to obstruct, by unnecessary difficulties, a mind eager in pursuit of truth; if he writes not to make others learned, but to boast the learning which he possesses himself and wishes to be admired rather than understood, he counteracts the first end of writing, and justly suffers the utmost severity of censure, or the more afflictive severity of neglect.

‘But words are only hard to those who do not understand them, and the critic ought always to enquire, whether he is incommoded by the fault of the writer, or by his own.

‘Every writer does not write for every reader; many questions are such as the illiterate part of mankind can have neither interest nor pleasure in discussing, and which therefore it would be an useless endeavour to level with common minds, by tiresome circumlocutions or laborious explanations; and many subjects of general use may be treated in a different manner, as the book is intended for the learned or the ignorant.’

Johnson is less generous in his verdict here than in his

passage on Dryden. He was not thinking of the wide audience which any one in a position of leadership or responsibility in a modern democratic state must address. He contemplated, more narrowly, a circle of men, and of some women, all of whom had a common education, with a strong classical bias, and all of whom enjoyed the play of words in a manner that tested their intelligence, while at the same time giving them a mental delight.

In the *Lives of the Poets* Johnson often wrote more simply without forsaking the basic elements on which his style is constructed. Here, for instance, is a passage in his *Life of Milton*:

‘Dryden remarks that Milton has some flats among his elevations. This is only to say that all the parts are not equal. In every work one part must be for the sake of others; a place must have passages, a poem must have transitions. It is no more to be required that wit should always be blazing, than that the sun should always stand at noon. In a great work there is always a vicissitude of luminous and opaque parts, as there is in the world a succession of day and night. Milton when he has expatiated in the sky, may be allowed sometimes to revisit earth; for what other author ever soared so high, or sustained his flight so long.’

The main concession that Johnson makes here is that the sentences are brief though a certain balance in which one half of the sentence answers the other is retained. Some of the language has the simplicity of Direct English as, for instance, ‘in every work one part must be for the sake of

others'. Ye¹₁ Johnson is not to be confined to such plain words. So 'the vicissitude of luminous and opaque parts' comes with a bold polysyllabic aggressiveness following on the simpler phrases that precede it. Throughout it can be affirmed that Johnson added liveliness to weight, and that in his consciously elaborate style there is an effect to wit, of learning, and of a personality striding surely, even if heavily, through the words.

The greatest exponent of the classical manner⁷, though modified in many ways, was Johnson's friend Edmund Burke. His speeches and pamphlets were prepared with all the care of an artist, who aware of his own genius was yet determined to exercise it in its fullest and boldest form. Further, though even his speeches were written, he writes always with the eloquence of one who is aware of the audience. Burke's prose belongs fully to the prose of persuasion and he is said to have affirmed himself that each great passage must have a thought, an image and a sentiment. It is a prose which cannot be easily illustrated from short passages but I would quote the following from his attack on 'the mechanic philosophy' in his *Reflections on the French Revolution*:

'It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the queen of France, then the dauphiness, at Versailles; and surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision. I saw her just above the horizon, decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she just began to move in, glittering like the morning star, full

of life, and splendour, and joy. Oh! what a revolution! and what a heart must I have, to contemplate without emotion that elevation and that fall! Little did I dream when she added titles of veneration to those of enthusiastic distant, respectful love, that she should ever be obliged to carry the sharp antidote against disgrace concealed in that bosom; little did I dream that I should have lived to see such disasters fallen upon her in a nation of gallant men, in a nation of men of honour and of cavaliers. I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult. But the age of chivalry is gone. That of sophisters, economists and calculators has succeeded, and the glory of Europe is extinguished for ever. Never, never more, shall we behold that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom. The unbought grace of life, the cheap defence of nations, the nurse of manly sentiment and the heroic enterprise is gone! It is gone, that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honour, which felt a stain like a wound, which inspired courage whilst it mitigated ferocity, and which ennobled whatever it touched, and under which vice itself lost half its evil by losing all its grossness.

“This mixed system of opinion and sentiment had its origin in the ancient chivalry; and the principle, though varied in its appearance by the varying state of human affairs, subsisted and influenced through a long succession of generations, even to the time we live in. If it should ever be totally extinguished, the loss I fear will be great. It is this which has given its character to modern Europe. It is this which has distinguished it under all its forms of

government, and distinguished it to its advantage, from the state¹ of Asia and possibly from those states which flourished, in the most brilliant periods of the antique world. It was this which, without confounding ranks, had produced a noble equality, and handed it down through all the gradations of social life. It was this opinion which mitigated kings into companions and raised private men to be fellows with kings. Without force or opposition, it subdued the fierceness of pride and power; it obliged sovereigns to submit to the soft collar of social esteem, compelled stern authority to submit to elegance, and gave a domination vanquisher of laws, to be subdued by manners.

‘But now all is to be changed. All the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason; all the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off; all the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd and antiquated fashion.

‘On this scheme of things a king is but a man, a queen is but a woman; a woman is but an animal, and an animal not of the highest order; all homage paid to the sex in general as such, and without distinct views, is to be regarded as romance and folly. Regicide, and parricide and sacrilege, are but fictions of superstition, corrupting jurisprudence by destroying its simplicity. The murder

of a king, or a queen, or a bishop, or a father, is only common homicide; and if the people are by any chance, or in any way gainers by it, a sort of homicide much the most pardonable, and into which we ought not to make too severe a scrutiny.

On the scheme of this barbarous philosophy, which is the offspring of cold hearts and muddy understandings, and which is as void of solid wisdom as it is destitute of all taste and elegance, laws are to be supported only by their own terrors, and by the concern which each individual may find in them, from his own private speculations, or can spare to them from his own private interests.'

It is clear that Burke's purposes and those of Direct English have little or nothing in common. Burke uses rhythm, emphasis, repetition and vocabulary in order to make us feel in a certain way about the thought he is presenting. A clear example is in the sentence: 'I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult'. Here, the imagery has that excess which, like the language of poetry, lights up the mind with the sentiment and the enthusiasm of the author. It may be that sober reason will find much to criticize in the passage but its beauty of movement cannot be denied.

In Direct English we would think of all the many practical occasions where reason is more important than beauty and where the honest and unambiguous presentation of fact is more commendable than rhetoric. One of the best criticisms of Burke's style is to be found in an essay by

W. Macneil Dixon.¹ There he writes: 'His temper rather than any lack of taste made him too eager-voiced: He grasped at much that did not fall naturally within his reach, lost *chiaroscuro* in unrelieved emphasis, and attained the massive at the expense of the beautiful'. Then he goes on to pay a warm tribute to Burke's beauty of style and strength of imagination. Still the truth remains that for the purposes of public communication, and for politics we are safer with less rhetoric however beautiful. These arts are secure only to the extent to which the minds behind them are sound and honest. The safest way of perceiving whether the mind is honest is to advocate that it should express itself in the simplest manner. Let the more complicated style be left for the arts and let government and politics stand as it were in the nakedness of truth in the most simple and direct style.

It was in Edward Gibbon that the classical style found its most brilliant and yet controlled employment in England. In his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, a work which so deeply influenced Winston Churchill in his early years, Gibbon found an instrument which gave breadth and cohesion to his narrative and yet permitted the play of his ironical temper. Gibbon, of all the great masters of the classical style, never makes any sacrifice of clarity to his manner. He is as lucid as if he were writing in simple sentences and with monosyllabic words. Nor does he ever give the effect of fatigue which is present at times in the more

¹*English Prose Selections*. Vol. IV. H. Craik, p. 377.

elaborately ornamented passages of Burke. Saintsbury summed up his powers when he wrote, 'As a *constant* master of prose rhythm he seems to me the superior both of Johnson and of Burke; and he is certainly less open to the charge of visible skeleton-clock mechanism than the one, or to the reproach of calculated purple patches than the other'.

I quote here a brief passage from Gibbon's *Autobiography*:

'When I contemplate the common lot of mortality, I must acknowledge that I have drawn a high prize in the lottery of life. The far greater part of the globe is over-spread with barbarism or slavery. In the civilized world, the most numerous class is condemned to ignorance and poverty; and the double fortune of my birth in a free and enlightened country, in an honourable and wealthy family is the lucky chance of a unit against millions. The general probability is that a new-born infant will not live to complete his fiftieth year. I have now passed that age.

The present is a fleeting moment, the past is no more; and our prospect of futurity is dark and doubtful. This day may possibly be my last; but the laws of probability, so true in general, so fallacious in particular, still allow me about fifteen years. I shall soon enter into the period which, as the most agreeable of his long life, was selected by the judgement and experience of the Sage Fontenelle. His choice is approved by the eloquent historian of nature, who fixes our moral happiness to the mature season in which our passions are supposed to have calmed, our duties fulfilled, our ambition satisfied, our fame and fortune established on a solid basis.'

The charge of monotony has sometimes, I think very

unjustly, been brought against such a prose. There is variety in the use of detail, in the mood and in the temper, and more practically in the length of the sentences employed. It can be rightly urged that this classical style enters into the matter and endows it with a dignity which it did not previously possess. It gives unity, for instance, to the middle sections of *The Decline and Fall*, where the matter is in itself complex and confused. In the art of prose it is a great instrument which adds persuasion to the narrative and can give pleasure to the reader. It can be transferred into an oral medium as Mr Churchill has shown and it gives a broad sweep and dignity to political speaking. I return though to the belief that the lives of men would be happier if their statesmen could avoid rhetoric, however brilliant, and rely on the simple truth of direct statement.

I emphasize, in conclusion, the difference between the complexities of the classical style, and the complexities of the inflated prose written by the modern writers of memoranda, orders and directives. The writer in the classical style was writing with a definite aim. He knew what he was doing. He had a definite purpose. He was an artist in words, giving elegance, and ceremonial with the elaboration of the patterns of his sentences and his fine-sounding words. The modern memoranda writer has no such aim. He writes elaborately with no clear intention, unless, on some occasions, it be the desire to deceive. Dr Johnson's prose cannot be turned into Direct English without losing

its beauty. As easily could a baroque church be turned into an evangelical chapel. The English of the memoranda writer can, as I have already shown, be turned into Direct English, not only with a greater lucidity in the meaning, but with a more satisfactory movement in the sentence itself.

CHAPTER VIII

Some further examples of more elaborate styles

I would examine here some more elaborate styles. One principle remains common to Direct English and to all elaborate writing where the elaboration has a justification. It is that no unnecessary word is introduced, and no phrase can be reduced in length without affecting the meaning of the whole. In this way the elaborate writing of a literary master differs from a passage of *inflated* writing where on analysis the writing can be shortened but the full meaning retained. In brief, you can write as you wish as long as you know what you are doing, and if you do it successfully. The examples which I quote here have all some element of the excessive. They are attempts made by highly individual writers, and they cannot easily be imitated.

I quote first a short paragraph with which Thomas Carlyle opened Part II, Book VI, of *The French Revolution*:

What then is this thing, called *La Révolution* which, like an Angel of Death, hangs over France, noyading, fusillading, fighting, gun-boring, tanning human skins? *La Révolution* is but so many Alphabetic Letters; a thing nowhere to be laid hands on, to be clapped under lock and key: where is it? what is it? It is the Madness that dwells in the hearts of men. In this man it is, and in that

man; as a rage or as a terror, it is in all men. Invisible, impalpable; and yet no black Azrael with wings spread over half a continent with sword sweeping from sea to sea could be a truer Reality.

It is true that the central idea of this passage could be more briefly expressed. Presumably Carlyle wished to say:

The idea of the French Revolution cannot be defined but it is a reality and could at this period be seen in all types of military activity and as a mad passion in all types of men.

But Carlyle's aim is not solely to make a factual statement. He desires to arouse the reader to the immensity of the uprising and to give some visual picture of the activities in which it displayed itself. He wishes to move his reader emotionally, to arouse him, and almost to frighten him. Every phrase in his paragraph aims with some degree of success at this end.

For instance he describes the activities in which *La Révolution* appeared. He is not content to describe them in general terms, but presents them in vivid and startling detail. So, for instance:

noyading is to put to death by drowning as practised by Carrier at Nantes in 1794;

fusillading is a simultaneous discharge of firearms, and can mean and probably does mean here a mass execution;

fighting, is fighting;

gun-boring means, probably, in this passage to force an entry by the holes made by guns;

tanning human skins, is a reference to the Tannery at Men-

don- where 'of such 'of the Guillotined as seemed worth flaying perfectly good wash-leather was made'.

Each word in the list has been thought out and is a summary of a whole action, so that the list becomes a panorama in brief of the Revolution.

I am not suggesting that Carlyle's style is perfect or even desirable, but he is sufficient of an artist not to waste words. He is using words successfully for a well-defined purpose. Froude, his biographer, summarizes both Carlyle's skill and limitations when he writes: 'the style which troubled others and troubled himself when he thought about it, was perhaps the best possible to convey thoughts which were often like the spurting of volcanic fire; but it was inharmonious, rough-hewn and savage'. Carlyle is not only making statements and creating pictures, but, as I have suggested, he is making a definite assault on the emotions. It is here that some of the more elaborate effects are used. So he introduces 'the Angel of Death' and the strange and unfamiliar image of the 'black Azrael'. They may not belong to the highest order of imaginative writing but they do give a grandeur to the passage.

I quote one other passage from Carlyle's *The French Revolution*. It occurs in Part II, Book IV, Chapter I, and it forms part of his description of the assassination of Marat by Charlotte Corday:

'About eight on the Saturday morning, she purchases a large sheath-knife in the Palais Royal; then straight-way

in the Place des Victoires, takes a hackney-coach: "To the Rue de l'Ecole de Médecine, No. 44? It is the residence of the Citoyen Marat." The Citoyen Marat is ill, and cannot be seen; which seems to disappoint her much. Her business is with Marat then? Hapless beautiful Charlotte; hapless squalid Marat! From Caen in the utmost west, from Neuchatel in the utmost east, they two are drawing nigh each other; they two have, very strangely, business together – Charlotte, returning to her Inn, dispatches a short note to Marat; signifying that she is from Caen, the seat of rebellion; that she desires earnestly to see him, and "will put it in his power to do France a great service". No answer. Charlotte writes another Note, still more pressing; sets out with it by coach, about seven in the evening, herself. Tired day-labourers have again finished their work; huge Paris is circling and simmering, manifold, according to its vague wont; this one fair Figure has decision in it; drives straight – towards a purpose.'

This passage shows the contrast in Carlyle's style from the occasions on which he is making statements, and those on which he is creating a mood or attempting to persuade the reader. The sections which are statements have a compact simplicity: "To the Rue de l'Ecole de Médecine, No. 44? It is the residence of Citoyen Marat." The Citoyen Marat is ill, and cannot be seen; which seems to disappoint her much.' No effort of analysis could compress this passage. It is expressed in the minimum number of words. Carlyle, however, wishes not only to make statements but to impress one with their importance. So we move from the language of fact, to that of persuasion in the phrase: 'From

Cæm in the utmost west, from Neuchatel in the utmost east, they two are drawing nigh each other'. Obviously this could be more briefly expressed but the impression of a great event affecting the whole destiny of France would have been lost.

I turn from these more complex passages to a competent description by Anthony Trollope in *The Warden*. It is a description of the residence of Archdeacon Grantley at Plumstead Episcopi. Trollope's aim is not so much to give information as to give pleasure, and long though the description may be, it remains entertaining throughout. Yet its merit does not lie solely in this, for each of the many details are contributing not merely to the picture of a room but to a portrait of a character. The confident, prosperous and self-regarding Archdeacon is shown through his breakfast-table, and this so clearly that Trollope does not have to emphasize the fact. He allows himself a certain amount of exaggeration but this is all. The extreme example is in his description of the types of bread on the Archdeacon's table: 'hot bread and cold bread, white bread and brown bread, home made bread and bakers' bread, wheaten bread and oaten bread; and if there be other breads than these, they were there'. The passage reads:

'And now let us observe the well-furnished breakfast-parlour at Plumstead Episcopi, and the comfortable air of all the belongings of the Rectory. Comfortable they certainly were, but neither gorgeous nor even grand; indeed considering the money that had been spent there,

the eye and taste might have been better served; there was an air of heaviness about the rooms which might have been avoided without any sacrifice of propriety; colours might have been better chosen and lights more perfectly diffused; but perhaps in doing so the thorough clerical aspect of the whole might have been somewhat marred; at any rate, it was not without ample consideration that those thick, dark, costly carpets were put down; those embossed but sombre papers hung up; those heavy curtains draped so as to half exclude the light of the sun: nor were those old-fashioned chairs bought at a price far exceeding that now given to far more modern goods, without a purpose. The breakfast-service on the table was equally costly and equally plain; the apparent object had been to spend money without obtaining brilliancy or splendour. The urn was of thick and solid silver, as were also the tea-pot, coffee-pot, cream-ewer, and sugar-bowl; the cups were old, dim dragon china, worth about a pound a piece, but very despicable in the eyes of the uninitiated. The silver forks were so heavy as to be disagreeable to the hand, and the bread basket was a weight really formidable to any but robust persons. The tea consumed was the very best, the coffee the very blackest, the cream the very thickest, there was dry toast and buttered toast, muffins and crumpets, hot bread and cold bread, white bread and brown bread, home made bread and bakers' bread, wheaten bread and oaten bread; and if there be other breads than these, they were there; there were eggs in napkins, crispy bits of bacon under silver covers; and there were little fishes in a little box, and devilled kidneys frizzling on a hot-water dish: which, by-the-by, were placed contiguous to the plate of the worthy arch-deacon himself. Over and above this, on a snow-white napkin, spread upon the sideboard, was a huge ham and a huge sirloin; the latter

~ having laden the dinner table on the previous evening. Such was the ordinary fare at Plumstead Episcopi.'

It is unnecessary to emphasize that the aim here is totally different from that of simple statement. Yet given Trollope's purpose it can be maintained that there is no waste. It could, of course, be argued that an adequate description could be given in fewer words. Against this it can be urged that in Trollope the details are themselves interesting, and their accumulation heightens the effect. Trollope is, in fact, using words very much as a painter uses colours. Further, like Carlyle, he knows exactly what he is attempting to do.

In contrast to this passage I quote a brief extract, describing the Alps, from the novel *Beauchamp's Career* by Trollope's contemporary George Meredith:

'Nevil Beauchamp dozed for half an hour. He was awakened by light on his eyelids, and starting up beheld the many pinnacles of grey and red rocks and shadowy high white regions at the head of the gulf waiting for the sun; and the sun struck them. One by one they came out in crimson flame, till the vivid host appeared to have stepped forward. The shadows on the snowfields deepened to purple, below an irradiation of rose and pink and dazzling silver. There all of the world you might imagine Gods to sit. A crowd of mountains endless in range, erect, or flowing, shuttered and arid, or leaning in smooth lustre, hangs above the gulf. The mountains are sovereign Alps and the sea is beneath them. The whole gigantic body keeps the sea, as with a hand to right and left.'

Now this passage is as unlike Direct English as it is possible to imagine. I do not put it forward as a great

passage of English prose. Certainly it is in a romantic style not popular today. Yet Meredith does know exactly what he is doing, even if he does something which we may not altogether like. He is not stating facts or issuing instructions and directives. Thus he is not using prose for the purposes for which Direct English is the only efficient instrument. Meredith wishes to depict the excitement which Nevil Beauchamp felt on seeing the Alps. For this purpose he uses imagery, or the art of imaginative comparison. He speaks of the mountains as if they were people and he dramatizes the relations of the mountains to nature as if they were the actions of a human scene. So the mountains are *waiting for the sun*, and then the sun *struck* them. The mountains are described as a *crowd*.

The passage is not lucid but it has an obscure magnificence and the mountains themselves have the same quality. Thus the passage has its merits as a work of art, as part of the prose of persuasion, but obviously it is not the language for simple or direct communication. If criticism is to be made of this passage it is possible that even for his own purposes Meredith is confused and excessive. I recall a visit from a Frenchman who had to translate this passage into his own language. He asked me how I would render 'A crowd of mountains endless in range, erect, or flowing, shuttered and arid, or leaning in smooth lustre'. I was unable to help him, and I think that if one examines the passage closely a certain obscurity even beyond the

needs of the subject appears. It can be agreed that Meredith is using words not for a *direct purpose* but to produce an impressionist effect, very much as a painter might do. As long as we retain a clear conception of simple or direct English we may allow the individual artists of English prose to indulge in whatever experiments they may favour most.

Finally I would quote a passage from Lord Macaulay's *History of England*¹, where he is describing the city of Bristol. Macaulay retains something of the balance in the sentence of the classical writer, and with this some phrases more abstract than those which Trollope employs. For instance he writes that the merchants of Bristol keep their 'tables loaded with good cheer'. This would not be enough for Trollope who would have given an entertaining list of the delicacies which constituted the 'good cheer'.

Further Macaulay's purpose is different from Trollope; he has to manage the large narrative of history, while Trollope can take his leisurely way through his own self-created story. Macaulay must have more discretion and ultimately more compression. The skill of his *History* is to be found in the way he combines detail with phrases that summarize a broad effect briefly, so allowing the great sweep of his narrative to proceed, while the reader is still given pleasure by the liveliness of his more intimate references.

¹From Chapter III.

Here is the passage:

Pepys, who visited Bristol eight years after the Restoration, was struck by the splendour of the city. But his standard was not high; for he noted down as a wonder the circumstance that in Bristol, a man might look round him and see nothing but houses. It seems that, in no other place with which he was acquainted, except London, did the buildings completely shut out the woods and fields. Large as Bristol might then appear, it occupied but a very small portion of the area on which it now stands. A few churches of eminent beauty rose out of a labyrinth of narrow lanes built upon vaults of no great solidity. If a coach or a cart entered those alleys, there was danger that it would be wedged between the houses, and danger also that it would break in the cellars. Goods were therefore conveyed about the town almost exclusively in trucks drawn by dogs; and the richest inhabitants exhibited their wealth, not by riding in gilded carriages but by walking the streets with trains of servants in rich liveries, and by keeping tables loaded with good cheer. The pomp of the christenings and burials far exceeded what was seen at any other place in England. The hospitality of the city was widely renowned, and especially the collations with which the sugar refiners regaled their visitors. The repast was dressed in the furnace, and was accompanied by a rich beverage made of the best Spanish wine, and celebrated over the whole kingdom as Bristol milk.

Seldom have knowledge and imagination combined so solidly, as in the pages of Macaulay's *History*.

I have illustrated here only a few of the elaborate styles which have been employed by English writers. One could add to them examples by Lord Berners, Bacon, Jeremy

Taylor, Sir Thomas Browne, Fielding, Sterne, De Quincey, Lamb, Ruskin and many others, apart from the modern elaborations, so different in intention and content as the styles of Walter Pater and James Joyce.

It is the great endowment of English as a language of art, that from the basis of a simple prose all these decorative variations are possible. But if the foundation of the simple language disappears the whole safety of the continuing structure of the language will be destroyed. It is not these great achievements of art that ultimately make and sustain the English language. This basic function is performed by the simple language, and it is only because it has so existed for centuries that all the experiments, the colour, and the rhetoric have been possible.

I would see English as a literary language flourish in all its 'Gothic intricacy' with a myriad of coloured words at the disposal of its artists, and patterns of sentence as involved as architecture in the manner of high baroque. Yet if a choice had to be made a nation would choose well to sacrifice some of this to have its laws written in a language which the people can understand. Fortunately such a choice is not necessary. It is the spurious inflation of language that is to be avoided. Complexity, as an artist makes complexity, and simplicity of all kinds can exist in harmony together.

CHAPTER IX

Political Oratory and Prose Style

In the earlier chapters of this book I have emphasized the importance of bringing Direct English into official writing. No less important is the reform of our political speaking, in Parliament itself, in local councils and on the public platform. For political oratory has played a special and important part in the life of England. It would be impossible to record the astronomical number of words that have been spoken in the House of Commons alone, apart from the debates in the House of Lords, and all the public speeches and radio talks which politicians have inflicted upon the public. When the House of Commons is in session between 64,000 and 120,000 words are spoken. The actual number depends on how many hours the House sits, the nature of the business and the speed of the individual speakers. An average of 8,000 words an hour is calculated by the experts as normal. These numbers are formidably high, when it is remembered that 64,000 words would be the size of an ordinary book. The official reports of the Parliamentary Debates, which are most skilfully recorded, cope successfully with this mass of words by printing a tall double-column page with usually over one

thousand words to a page. Even then, at times, over one hundred pages have been required to complete the day's record. It must be remembered that all these calculations omit the talking that goes on in the House of Lords. One could only wish that the skill of the parliamentary reporter were often given better material on which to work.

So insistent is the output of political speaking that it would be impossible for all this mass of words to have eloquence or rhetoric, and indeed it can be urged that this would be undesirable. For much of the time of the House is occupied in the serious but routine business of debate where the plainer and less varnished the tale the better. The modestly sized Chamber of the House of Commons has invited a quiet manner, unless the House is conscious of a great occasion, or unless emotions have been stirred. The danger of the House of Commons' tradition is that speech should be casual, long-winded, and repetitive. If Members of the House of Commons were to study Direct English the debates could be reduced to at least one third of their present length.

In England we pride ourselves on the freedom of our political institutions, and no one would wish, even in the most indirect way, to impose restrictions on the speaking in the House of Commons. But the ideal of freedom should not be made an excuse for the vice of incompetence. Anyone who reads the House of Commons' Reports consistently will be surprised at the low quality of the speaking

in the ordinary debates. Members seem so ready to speak on subjects on which they are inadequately prepared. Successful writing is impossible when the control of matter and thought is so imperfect. Would it in any way limit the freedom or diminish the dignity of Members of the House of Commons if they spoke only when they were fully informed on the subject, and further if they devoted some attention to the most brief and clear expression of what they wished to say?

At the same time the quiet and conversational manner prevalent in the House today has its advantages. It is not perpetually assailing the emotions; and it is less exposed to the dangers of exaggeration. It is capable of dealing with reason and with facts when the speaker has prepared his subject adequately. But its vices are diffuseness and flaccidity, and these have increased in recent times. In the nineteenth century there was a certain common, and classical, tradition which did at least avoid vagueness of phrase, the indolent repetition of argument, the thinness of matter and the grammatical uncertainty which became almost habitual with certain speakers in more recent times. An outstanding offender here, in his later years, was Ramsay Macdonald. Here is an example, when he was almost at his best in a public speech, and it can be affirmed confidently that no Prime Minister in the nineteenth century would have sunk so low:¹

¹From *American Speeches*.

‘I want to say quite definitely and clearly, I want the whole world to know it, and I say it without any reserve and any withholding of any kind whatever, that during the entire course of our conversations, there has never been any idea of an exclusive understanding between Great Britain and the United States. There has been nothing discussed which the two governments would not be happy to see discussed on the same basis with all the Powers in the world. The understanding we have been trying to establish will be incomplete and unsatisfactory until it has become the common possession of all the nations on the face of the earth.’

How much more effectively this could be expressed in Direct English though Direct English would immediately have exposed the paucity of thought. The mind is functioning at half power as can be seen in the accumulation of phrases in the first sentence (*quite definitely; clearly; without any reserve, any withholding of any kind whatever*). Language here is made to fill in the gaps caused by the vacuity of the speaker's mind.

In the House of Commons, especially when he was making unrehearsed statements, Ramsay Macdonald could fall far below this level. The following is typical of his style when least effective in the Debate on the Address on 20th November, 1930, in what was presumably a prepared statement. I emphasize that I am not, with any malicious intent, picking on unfortunate lapses, but I am choosing representative passages which are somewhat above the ordinary level. Ramsay Macdonald was

speaking on the Disarmament Conference:¹

‘We have, I regret to say, to look upon a position at the Disarmament Conference which is certainly not despairing but it is not too hopeful. We are going to Geneva – I think it will be at the beginning of the year, where the Disarmament Conference meets again – we are going to Geneva determined to make a trial, and more trials if necessary, to get something substantial and international out of the deliberations of that Conference; and the Gracious Speech says that in the meantime we shall take up certain points which we believe are ripe for solution and which can be separated from a general international agreement – matters like the private manufacture of arms, matters like some of these conventions which are now in draft in Geneva, but which have not been finally discussed or settled. We wish to come, and I want to assure the House that we shall take every opportunity presented at Geneva of coming to an international agreement that will bring the nations closer together, will increase their mutual confidence, and will broaden the basis of goodwill upon which ultimately the real fabric of international peace will have to be built.’

I need not indicate the many repetitions and loose phrases with which this passage is padded out. A phrase such as ‘*which is certainly not despairing, but it is not too hopeful*’ indicates a mind that is moving with a painful slowness. The same sluggishness occurs throughout and is very marked in the passage: ‘*We wish to come, and I want to assure the House that we shall take every opportunity of coming*’. Typical again of the state of mind is the dimly

¹Parliamentary Debates: Fifth Series, Vol. 295, Col. 25.

conceived metaphor at the end in which *international peace is built on a fabric*.

In the great and more leisured days of Victorian parliamentary oratory such language is inconceivable. A great speaker would dignify with the grand gesture any theme however humble. The supreme exponent of this style was Gladstone, who used magnificent and elaborate periods so consistently that they became habitual. Here, for instance, is Gladstone answering an objection which had been raised to the Examiners who dealt with the competitions for entry into the Civil Service. The theme is modest enough, but not so the style:

‘The perseverance of my hon. Friend is so great that I have no doubt that even though this motion is negatived tonight he will return to the charge; but I do beseech him, *if he does*, so to make his attack, *if he pleases*, with so much courage and as determined a spirit as he has shown tonight but at the same time with greater care, with greater fairness, and a more anxious desire to do justice, not merely to the feelings, for that is a small matter, but the efficiency of those gentlemen who were engaged in most important duties.’

Such a paragraph is certainly far removed from Direct English. It is related to the more elaborate forms of the art of prose which are discussed in the previous chapters of the volume. It is, however, completely different from the dull, slow-moving and *styleless* prose of Ramsay Macdonald. It has, like the prose of every artist, a complete command of the medium of speech. For instance, the speaker

who could insert those two phrases marked in italics, *if he does*, and *if he pleases*, had the elaborate sentence well in control and knew exactly where it would end. Like the prose of Dr Johnson the pattern of the sentence is pre-conceived in the mind of the author and the mind controls the thought into its predestined channel.

This elaborate prose was acceptable in a period when the business of Parliament was conducted with far less pressure than at present. The men who disputed the issues had all enjoyed a classical education and they appealed, both inside the House and in the country, to men with a similar background. Their hearers had studied the periodic sentence with its controlled but labyrinthine movement in the speeches of Cicero and they rejoiced to see effects as similar as an uninflected language would permit in the prose of Gladstone and his contemporaries. Rhetoric was important to these statesmen for on the effectiveness of their rhetoric depended much of their reputation. Further they practised rhetoric for its own sake as an art, enjoying to the full the exchanges of debate.

Possibly in Benjamin Disraeli this art of political oratory found its supreme exponent though Liberals will naturally prefer the resounding and most skilfully maintained periods of Gladstone. Of the two, Disraeli seems to me the more conscious artist, more varied in the emotional range which he employs, from wit to pathos, from eloquence to deadly strokes of satire. I first quote Disraeli must-

ering his resources on an important political occasion. Here is the conclusion of his speech against the Repeal of the Tariffs on Corn and against Free Trade:

‘I know that we have been told, and by one (Mr Cobden) who on this subject should be the highest authority, that we shall derive from this great struggle, not merely the repeal of the Corn Laws, but the transfer of power from one class to another – to one distinguished for its intelligence and wealth – the manufacturers of England. My conscience assures me that I have not been slow in doing justice to the intelligence of that class; certain I am that I am not one of those who envy them their wide and deserved prosperity; but I must confess my deep mortification that in an age of political regeneration, when all social evils are ascribed to the operation of class interests, it should be suggested that we are to be rescued from the alleged power of one class, only to sink under the avowed dominion of another. I, for one, if this is to be the end of all our struggles – if this is to be the great result of this enlightened age – I, for one, protest against this ignominious catastrophe. I believe that the monarchy of England, its sovereignty mitigated by the acknowledged authority of the estates of the realm, has its root in the hearts of the people, and is capable of securing the happiness of the nation and the power of the State. But, Sir, if this be a worn-out dream – if, indeed, there is to be a change, I for one, anxious as I am to maintain the present policy of this country, ready to make as many sacrifices as any man for that object – if there is to be this great change, I, for one, hope that the foundation of it may be deep, the scheme comprehensive, and that instead of falling under such a thralldom, under the thralldom of capital – under the thralldom of those who, while they boast of their intelligence,

are more proud of their wealth – if we must find a force to maintain the ancient throne and immemorial monarchy of England, I, for one, hope that we may find that novel power in the invigorating energies of an educated and enfranchised people.’

The passage is less complex and organic in structure than the periods on which Gladstone’s orations were based. Disraeli accepts the fact that he is employing the spoken word as can be seen in the repetition of such phrases as ‘I, for one’. He allows the range of his rhetoric to broaden in its sweep as his emotion increases in the climax in which he states his fundamental convictions. The whole passage gains as oratory from the impression it gives of being thought out as the speaker proceeds. This appearance of the unpremeditated may be gained by a trick but however it originates it is used with such skill that it increases the conviction that Disraeli is speaking from his heart.

On some occasions he could be more calculating. One of the supreme examples of his oratorical art is to be found in his attack on Peel. Disraeli had been criticizing Peel but had pleaded that his comments were not based on hostility. Peel in reply quoted four lines of verse by his predecessor, Canning:

Give me the avowed, the erect, the manly foe;
Bold I may meet, perhaps may turn, the blow;
But of all plagues, good Heaven, Thy wrath can send,
Save, save, O save me from the candid friend.

It was rash for Peel to quote this passage for he had played towards Canning the very role which he now accused Disraeli of playing. For a few days Disraeli matured his reply and then delivered against Peel one of the most finished and venomous attacks in the whole of English political oratory:

‘The right honourable gentleman knows what the introduction of a great name does in debate – how important is its effect, and occasionally how electrical. He never refers to any author who is not great, and sometimes who is not loved – Canning for example. That is a name never to be mentioned, I am sure, in the House of Commons without emotion. We all admire his genius. We all, at least most of us, deplore his untimely end, and we all sympathize with him in his fierce struggle with supreme prejudice and sublime mediocrity – with inveterate foes and with candid friends. The right honourable gentleman may be sure that a quotation from such an authority will always tell. Some lines for example, upon friendship, written by Mr Canning, are quoted by the right honourable gentleman. The theme, the poet, the speaker, what a felicitous combination. Its effect in debate must be overwhelming; and I am sure, if it were addressed to me, all that would remain would be for me thus publicly to congratulate the right honourable gentleman not only for his ready memory, but on his courageous conscience.’

Here every phrase is carefully selected and made to play its part in a picture, cunning pre-conceived. The opening is deliberately and deceptively subdued; only gradually does one sense that the motive of the passage is attack, and indeed not until the last phrases does the listener realize

that Peel's reference to Canning is now to be used against him with deadly effect.

I readily admit that the grand manner belongs to a buried age, an age when the tempo of public life could accept verbal elegance as one of its adornments. But even if this prose was elaborate it was never empty, and political speakers can still educate themselves by studying the more disciplined minds of their predecessors without necessarily imitating the mannerisms.

CHAPTER X

Political Oratory and the use of English today

I admitted at the close of the last chapter that it would be unwise, and indeed impossible, to continue today the Victorian tradition of political oratory. I examine here, in concluding this study, some of the new conditions which affect contemporary political prose.

Winston Churchill is the sole survivor of the old tradition of parliamentary eloquence and he has brought in many new features to meet a new age, apart from his ability to convey his own personality into the very substance of his speeches. He knows that the audience he addresses is a far wider one than occupied the attention of Disraeli and Gladstone. Every adult, man and woman, has a vote and they can all read, so that the words of a political leader must be intelligible to the great masses. So it is that though he has an affection for the more generous and ample movements of eloquence, based largely on his early admiration for Gibbon, he interlards the periods of his grand manner with simple and colloquial phrases.

It is symbolic of the new age that the great master of oratory made one of the greatest successes in his war speeches with the simple idiomatic phrase: 'Some chicken!

Some neck!’ This occurred in a speech which he made on 30th December, 1941, to the two Houses of the Dominion Legislature in Canada. Much of its success arose from its unexpectedness in the context in which it was found. Its employment came instinctively to one who had mastered the art of addressing not only the audience in front of him but the vast miscellaneous radio audience in many different countries. The passage in which the phrase occurs discusses the conduct of the French Authorities before the fall of France. He had in mind that General Weygand had told the French politicians that, within a few weeks of the fall of France, England’s defeat would be certain and that she would have her neck wrung like a chicken. The passage in Mr Churchill’s speech reads:

‘When I warned them that Britain would fight on alone whatever they did, their generals told their Prime Minister and his divided Cabinet, “In three weeks England will have her neck wrung like a chicken”. Some chicken! Some neck!’

The audience of today both inside and outside Parliament has grown distrustful of rhetoric. With a general increase in education there has been a welcome desire to have argument rather than emotional appeal. Above all, the radio, which has become an important instrument in political discussion, leads to an emphasis on an easy, conversational approach rather than on loud-sounding oratory. The speaker on the radio may be addressing a million hearers but he is addressing them as individuals

not as a great audience which can be subjected to mass appeal. He has to aim at the 'fireside talk', of which Franklin Roosevelt was such a master. Further, modern man has had his emotions appealed to so often and so powerfully that he is exhausted, and is more likely to be won by the voice which seems quiet, reasonable and ingratiating.

The degree to which public taste in oratory has changed in the last thirty years can be seen by comparing the speeches of Lloyd George in his early, pioneering days and during the First World War with those that command attention today. In the early days of the 1914-1918 war Lloyd George appealed to the country with a number of speeches in the grand manner, proper to one who had sat in the House of Commons with Gladstone. He relied upon the idealism of his audience and its fervour to appreciate the great emotional appeal of his eloquence. One of the most famous of these speeches was made outside the House of Commons to a public audience about a month after war had been declared. It reaches probably the greatest height of oratory that Lloyd George ever attained, and delivered in a voice of remarkable natural beauty its effect must have been considerable:

'It is a great opportunity, an opportunity which comes only once in many centuries to the children of men. For most generations sacrifice comes in drab guise and weariness of spirit. It comes to you today, and it comes today to all of us, in the form of the glow and thrill of a great move-

ment for liberty, that impels millions throughout Europe to the same noble end. We have been living in a sheltered valley for generations. We have been too comfortable and too indulgent – many perhaps too selfish – and the stern hand of fate has scourged us to an elevation where we can see the everlasting things that matter for a nation – the great peaks we had forgotten, of Honour, Duty, Patriotism, and clad, in glittering white, the towering pinnacle of Sacrifice, pointing like a rugged figure to Heaven.’

Here is the political speaker as artist, using the same effects, as I have studied in the work of Carlyle or Meredith. He has removed himself from argument and fact and he is relying on a direct appeal to the emotions. Countries will probably be happier when their statesmen can conduct business solely by reason and not by emotional rhetoric. At the same time one can recognize the artistry of this passage, the genuine imagination and power which gradually leads up to a climax.

When war came again in 1939, the occasion seemed too urgent, too critical, for such a luxury of verbal indulgence. The spacious romanticism which a quarter of a century later seems present in Lloyd George’s remarks would no longer appeal to an audience that knew the realities of modern warfare. So when Winston Churchill comes to form his Government in 1940, although he is himself a master of rhetoric it is a more direct and urgent style that he employs:¹

‘In this crisis I hope I may be pardoned if I do not

¹*Parliamentary Reports*. 13th May, 1940. Col. 1502.

address the House at any length today. I hope that any of my friends and colleagues, or former colleagues, who are affected by the political reconstruction, will make allowance, all allowance, for any lack of ceremony with which it has been necessary to act. I would say to the House, as I said to those who have joined this Government: I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat. . . . But I take up my task with buoyancy and hope. I feel sure that our cause will not be suffered to fail amongst men. At this time I feel entitled to claim the aid of all. Come then, let us go forward together with our united strength.'

This passage has, of course, a very powerful appeal to the emotions. The 'blood, toil, tears and sweat' sentence became one of the best-remembered phrases of the war. But it is an appeal to the emotions through a statement of fact, though the statement has been cunningly arranged and made with the greatest economy. Very few gestures towards a more ample style are permitted. The half-biblical 'I feel sure that our cause will not be suffered to fail amongst men' is one of the few. Much of the passage is monosyllabic. The speaker relies on his thought and the occasion and the arrangement of words without the grand flourish of rhetoric or a poetic imagery.

A certain picturesque quality has gone from public life with the loss of the more coloured and imaginative verbal arts of which Lloyd George was a master. The reader of the Parliamentary Reports will discover that Lloyd George did not confine his attention to eloquence. In debate he argues, cajoles and at times uses an almost conversational

tone to win an opponent into agreement. When he sees a possibility of gaining a concession he will use blandishments, but faced with hostility he can employ deadly satire, and a merciless irony. Often he will decorate his speech with imagery derived from biblical sources, or with a homely phrase thrown into a high-flown passage of imaginative metaphor and, with a Celtic suddenness, he will vary the mood from the comic to pathos. In the days when he was fighting for social reform he would make savage speeches outside Parliament, and then come down to the House of Commons in a mood of sweet reasonableness.

One of the most outspoken of all Lloyd George's speeches was the notorious 'Limehouse' address, named after the district in London where it was first made. Here he stretched his appeal to the limit in passages such as the following:

'It is rather hard that an old workman should have to find his way to the gates of the tomb, bleeding and foot-sore, through the brambles and thorns of poverty. We cut a new path for him [these were the Old Age Pensions] – an easier one, a pleasanter one through fields of waving corn.'

This seems less dangerous than when it was first uttered. Now, we notice rather that the style belongs to the older tradition where the speaker is not afraid of the emotions and a bold poetic imagery.

The temptation of eloquence is that it is ever in danger of gathering into a passage what the speaker feels should

be the right emotions on a given occasion. This can be seen very clearly in the passage quoted earlier from Lloyd George's war speech of 1914. The danger is even more apparent when a single person practises both writing and speaking as Winston Churchill has done. There is a memorable passage in *The World Crisis*¹ which is relevant here. Mr Churchill is describing his emotions at the end of the first World War when he was standing at the window of his room looking up Northumberland Avenue towards Trafalgar Square. He recalls how he was waiting for Big Ben to strike the hour and so announce that the war was over on 'the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month'. He recalls in a moving manner how his mind went back to the emotions which he had felt at the Admiralty when he heard the same chimes of Big Ben on giving out the signal of war to our fleets against Germany. He then summarizes in a passage of stately rhetoric the reflections which were left with him as a result of all his war experiences and of the consequences that would follow upon the great action.

I hesitate to subject such a great passage to criticism, but I would note one illuminating point. I recall John Buchan telling me that the chimes of Big Ben had been muffled during the war as they were thought to help the Zeppelins. Further they had not been started up again at the hour of the Armistice. I had some difficulty in checking

¹*The World Crisis* 1916-1918, Part II, p. 541. (1927.)

up this detail of almost contemporary history. Finally, however, the Ministry of Works was able to help me: 'The actual time of re-starting was noon, on 11th November, 1918'. So Winston Churchill was one hour out. This, of course, does not invalidate the passage. It shows only that the habit of eloquence led him in this dramatic way to gather impressions which must have been associated with this great occasion as a whole. It is not a passage where we can look for a precise statement of factual detail. Rather it is an imaginative re-creation in which emotion, and recollection and rhetoric, meet in a setting based on reflection.

I have already suggested in an earlier chapter that both in prose and verse nothing can ultimately equal in effect the direct statement, ungarnished by the effects of eloquence but supported by sufficient thought, or by the natural stress of emotion gained from the occasion on which the words are spoken. I would quote as an example the scene in the House of Commons on the day of the Armistice following the war of 1914-18. This is how the record reads:

Mr Lloyd George: 'This is no time for words. Our hearts are too full of a gratitude to which no tongue can give adequate expression. I will, therefore, move that this House do immediately adjourn, until this time tomorrow, and that we proceed as a House of Commons to St Margaret's to give humble and reverent thanks for the deliverance of the world from its great peril.'

Mr Asquith: 'I am sure that the House, without any distinction or difference of opinion will agree with the motion that the Prime Minister has made and that the course he proposes to adopt is the only one which is consonant with our feelings and with those of the country and the Empire. With regard to the terms of the Armistice as read out I will simply say this: It is clear from it that its acceptance by our enemies means not only that the War is at an end, but that war cannot be resumed, and I will join with a full heart in his aspiration not only that this War may not be resumed, but that now we have entered a new chapter in international history, in which war will be recognized as an obsolete anachronism, never to be revived. As the Prime Minister said, there is nothing that we can do in conditions so unexampled as these, but as a House and on behalf of the nation to acknowledge our gratitude to Almighty God.'

On the motion 'That this House do now adjourn', put and agreed to,

Mr Speaker: 'I propose to proceed at once to St Margaret's, and I will invite the House to follow very much in the order in which we proceeded on the 4th August last, namely: I will go first with the Mace, then I invite Privy Councillors to follow in fours, as far as may be in order of precedence, and then the rest of the House will follow on behind. We will occupy the seats in the Church all down the Nave on the South side.'

The final passage by the Speaker, which is a simple instruction in Direct English, is the most effective of all. It suggests that there is in English life a tradition which controls the individual, and prevents him from making a false move on a great occasion. Next to this controlled

correctness of the speaker is the instinctive correctness of Lloyd George who realizes that the occasion is too great for oratory. He attempts, almost with complete success, to confine himself to statement. Mr Asquith was, strangely enough, not so cautious. But it is true that wherever he steps into rhetoric the movement now seems false. History, for instance, has imposed a tragic irony on phrases such as 'we have entered a new chapter in international history, in which war will be recognized as an obsolete anachronism never to be revived'.

In a free community there can obviously be no control over political rhetoric whether inside or outside the House. On the public platform even a self-imposed control is probably impossible, but one might propose that members inside the House might find it of common advantage to have some instruction in Direct English. The whole machinery of Parliamentary Government is becoming overcrowded, and this, very largely, through the unnecessary and unrestrained verbosity of the Members. It may be necessary, for instance, in addressing constituents to repeat each point three times: such repetition will depend on one's estimate of the intelligence of the electors. But all such repetition in the House itself is useless and impedes the conduct of business. Every other profession admits that a training is necessary. If politicians on entry to the House would submit themselves to a brief course in Direct English then Sessions could be reduced by at least one third.

There is thus within our power a reform in our national life which would make all our communications clearer, increase our leisure and improve the relations between the public and its officials and legislators. This is what our language offers through Direct English, and indeed Direct English is nothing more than the practise of this our fine English language in its simplest form.

CHAPTER XI

Some Concluding Examples of Direct English

I now return to some further examples. I emphasize again that I am not criticizing the writers of the passages which I have analysed below. I have deliberately chosen passages which seem to me skilfully composed. It would have been easy enough, as I have previously stated, to discover clumsy and inept passages and by using them to score easy debating points. But that is not my aim. It would have been unfortunately equally easy to find in contemporary official English examples of prose which seem a parody of bad writing, but it would be unfair to consider these as typical or to base any generalizations on them. I wish to show that even the most adequate writer by ordinary standards can reduce the length of a statement if he will *deliberately* apply himself to the method of *Direct English*.

I have selected for discussion the following passage from a report on *The Cost of House Building*.¹ The passage is more complicated in its matter than any of those which I have so far selected. If consultation with the original draftsman were possible I am sure that the length of the Direct

¹H. M. Stationery Office. S. O. Code No. 32. 387

English version could be further reduced.

‘We are satisfied that a substantial raising of the 1947 level of output is possible and we believe that the system of incentive payments adopted by the industry can assist in this direction. We would point out, however, that any improvement in output resulting from the new system does not necessarily represent a reduction in labour costs below the level of October, 1947. In order merely to absorb the cost of the wages increase of approximately 10 per cent which came into force when the incentives scheme was adopted, and the additional 20 per cent on wages representing the postulated bonus earnings, a rise in output of 33 per cent would be necessary. Moreover there are a number of operations in building to which bonus payments cannot readily be applied and on which therefore an improvement in output may not occur. The men employed on this work will nevertheless have received the wages increase, which applied automatically to all building trade workers. Some additional cost will be incurred in administering bonus schemes, which entail frequent measuring of work and the calculation of bonus payments. Although the more rapid completion of the work will lead to a saving in plant costs and overhead expenses, it is clear that where incentive schemes are in operation a very substantial raising of output would be necessary to obtain a reduction in the October, 1947, cost of building. We believe nevertheless that on contracts where there is careful organization and a full degree of co-operation between management and men, the present incentives scheme would assist in securing a reduction in building costs, as well as in providing houses more rapidly. It is clear, however, that the extent to which output in house-building can be raised will be governed by the extent to

which supplies of materials are available to meet the additional demand.'

This passage I would render into Direct English as:

'A substantial rise in the 1947 level of output is possible by using incentive pay. But this does not reduce necessarily labour costs below the level of October 1947. A 33 per cent output rise is needed to meet the wages increase of about 10 per cent and the further 20 per cent for the postulated bonus earnings. Also some types of building work will not fit bonus payments and no improved output is possible, though men on such work will get the general pay increase. Some extra cost will result from administering bonus schemes, which need frequent measuring of work and calculating bonus payments. Though quicker completion will save plant costs and overhead expenses a big increase in output incentive schemes is necessary to reduce the October 1947 building costs. But we think with careful organization and full co-operation of management and men the present incentive schemes will reduce building costs and get houses built quicker. The rise in output must also depend on availability of materials.'

The length of the original passage is 309 words. The length of my rendering into Direct English is 172 words. This is a saving of 137, or more than a third of the original passage. As will be seen from the printed page the actual saving is greater than this for the majority of the words in the Direct English version are shorter than in the original passage.

I add some observations on how this has been achieved.

•(i) I admit that there is nothing to be done with this passage as far as the arrangement of the thought is concerned. The writers knew what they wanted to say and the order in which they wished to say it, which was a logical order. The problem here is that while there was clarity of thought there was no continuous and deliberate attention to brevity of expression.

(ii) When we examine the passage for unnecessary words and phrases the situation is found to be less satisfactory. What is gained, for instance, by phrases such as, *We are satisfied*, *We would point out*? They merely indicate the timidity of all writers of reports in making direct statements although, in fact, direct statements are essential.

The other example of the unnecessary phrase can be found in the use of *It is clear* which occurs twice in the passage:

(a) '*it is clear* that where incentive schemes are in operation'

(b) '*It is clear*, however, that the extent to which output in house-building can be raised . . .'

In both these instances *It is clear* in no way adds to the meaning of the passage. A direct statement is all that is necessary.

(iii) Apart from these phrases there are other useless words in the passage. For instance when the writers state:

'the new system does not *necessarily* represent a reduction' they mean

‘the new system does not represent a reduction’. . .

The whole argument in the passage shows that this is what they mean. *Necessarily* is not an addition to the thought expressed in a paragraph but one of those comfortable adverbs in which the writers take a temporary rest from thought.

(iv) This passage, in the same way as most similar passages, has a liberal assortment of words such as *more-over*, *nevertheless*, *however*, *although*. There are six instances of such usage in the passage. Most of these linking words are unnecessary. The context itself usually supplies the link or the contrast. If such a word must be introduced *but* and *yet* are much shorter than any of the words used and equally clear.

(v) I have retained the more technical terms used though I feel that, after consultation with the writers, some simpler expressions could be introduced. I leave *postulated bonus earnings* and *incentive payments* for this reason.

(vi) All my other reductions can be explained by the principles which I outlined in earlier chapters. They fall mainly under the headings of shorter words, the substitution of a word for a phrase and the deletion of phrases which are unnecessary because the context itself explains all they have to say. This last is, throughout, an important cause of saving, and could be increased if there had been a possibility of consultation with the writers.

I now examine the following shorter passages which

I have noticed in various official statements. In each instance I place in italics the words on which I would comment.

(i) '*Any impartial investigator entering many nurse training schools encounters an atmosphere of dissatisfaction or even discontent.*'

I submit that the whole meaning is retained if we omit the words 'Any impartial investigator entering'. No reader of the report will imagine that those who have prepared it intend to affirm that their evidence is based on witnesses who are not impartial. Once again an elaborate phrasing has been used because the writers are afraid of writing a direct statement. *Encounters* would also disappear if a direct statement were made.

(ii) '*The conclusion emerges clearly from this analysis that the type of discipline which pervades the training schools today is unquestionably the most important cause of wastage.*'

I submit that all the words and phrases in italics are unnecessary as they add nothing to the meaning.

Neither *clearly* nor *unquestionably* add in any way to the sense. If the analysis did not lead to a clear result the report would state this. Again the writers will not risk a direct statement. If the writers insist that for emphasis they need *clearly* they do not need both *clearly* and *unquestionably* as one of these words is merely doing the work of the other over again.

Perrades is an unnecessary word present from the faith that it adds a dignity to the passage. The word *today* is unnecessary as the context supplies the sense that the contemporary situation is being discussed. By *the most important* the writers mean only *the main* or *the major*.

Thus the passage as a whole can read:

‘We conclude that the type of discipline in the training schools is thus the main cause of wastage.’

The original passage had 26 words. The Direct English version has 18 words. A saving has been made of 8 words or nearly one-third of the original. A letter count shows that as the Direct English words are shorter the saving is more than a third of the original.

In the following example I deal with an official prose which is stating a regulation, or, in this instance, rather a suggestion. The meaning in the original is clear; but I feel certain that the writer has at the back of his mind the legal prose to which I have already referred. He has written in a more complicated way than is necessary because he is trying to protect himself, as a lawyer may have to do:

‘It will be found that only in rare cases will it be possible to apportion premises by actual physical division between the interested parties. Where this can be done it will, of course, usually be the easiest and most satisfactory solution. However, in most cases the premises to be apportioned consist of one building which cannot be physically divided. One method of dealing with the position will be

for the Minister to take the whole of the premises and pay to the other interested party compensation for the loss of that part of the premises to which it would be entitled had a physical separation taken place. The other body will probably wish to retain its occupation of part of the premises and that will then be allowed to continue subject to the payment to the Minister of a rent which will include the cost of common services. There is equally no objection to the present owners taking all the premises and compensating the Minister for his loss of rights, and charging him a rent for continued use.'

This may be rendered as follows:

'Where possible the premises should be physically divided. Where this is impossible, as they are one building, the Minister or the present owners may take the whole and pay compensation for the sections to which they are not entitled, and if desired occupy them on payment of rent and service charges.'

The length of the original passage is 183 words. The length of the passage in my Direct English version is 52 words. So by the use of Direct English two-thirds of the original have been eliminated. Such reductions are of particular importance to a Ministry such as the Ministry of Health which is issuing daily orders, and suggestions, which are read by thousands of officials in different parts of the country.

I comment briefly on how the reduction has been achieved. First, I have removed all the empty or meaningless phrases, such as *It will be found*, and *in rare cases*.

Then I remove all the qualifying words and phrases where actually the writer intends no qualification.

They abound in this passage and would seem to be inserted in a mood of caution, and to give the writer a comfortable sense of possible escape should he not wish to stand by his simple or direct statement. Examples in this passage are *only*, *usually*, *probably*, *equally*. The major saving has come, as so frequently, from combining in one sentence a number of statements that in the original have been made more loosely and with a degree of repetition in successive sentences. It will be noticed that in this way the number of times that such a phrase as *the interested party* occurs has been reduced.

Some small savings have come from leaving out phrases which the context renders unnecessary.

I return here to the criticism which I have previously discussed, for I am aware that it may be urged that by compression I have made the passage less easily intelligible. It will be said that the adverbs, and other words of qualification and all the lazy phrases which give the reader a mental rest and the writer a sense of security, make the whole easier to understand. But I only reply that once the reader will accept frank, direct statements he will come to feel that the scaffolding of a great deal of modern prose is only unnecessary addition to the structure.

CHAPTER XII

The use of the Dictionary in the Writing of Direct English

It will be seen that to achieve Direct English the writer must be clearly aware of whether his meaning is expressed in the simplest words possible. This necessitates a power of analysing the words used and seeing if they can be broken down into simpler words. For this purpose a dictionary is necessary, but it must be a dictionary of a special kind.

Dictionaries in England began in the age of Shakespeare. The first was published by Robert Cawdrey in 1604. It was called, *A Table Alphabetical, containing and teaching the true writing, and understanding of hard usual English words, borrowed from the Hebrew, Greek, Latin or French, with the interpretation thereof by plain English words, gathered for the benefit and help of Ladies and Gentlewomen, or any other unskilful persons.*

Cawdrey's work contained only about 2,500 words. It was published at a time when the English language was being most variedly used, and when Shakespeare, whose vocabulary has been estimated at 15,000 words, was already half-way through his work. Actually Shakespeare and his contemporaries had a number of reference works for the development of their vocabulary, especially bi-

lingual dictionaries and glossaries both for modern and classical languages.

Cawdrey's modest list was aiming at one of the primary and perhaps the most difficult services that a dictionary can perform, namely the definition of the meaning of words. Cawdrey did not, in fact, carry this purpose very far, but it was the outstanding feature of Samuel Johnson's great dictionary, first published in 1755. In defining the meaning of a word the lexicographer must be provided with examples of how the word has been used, and, as is known, Johnson in the attic room of his house in Gough Square employed a number of readers who listed examples of the use of words by authors from the Elizabethan Age to the Eighteenth Century. Johnson's own great quality of mind showed itself in his ability to express clearly and simply the range of meanings which the examples suggested that any given word possessed. With him more than with any English lexicographer the power of definition remained supreme over the examples, and the examples were never a substitute for definition.

The making of all subsequent dictionaries in England has owed much to Johnson's great achievement. No one single-handed has since his day attempted and executed so great a plan. The most ambitious of the modern dictionaries in England is the *New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* which was founded 'mainly on the materials collected by the Philological Society' and which was

named in its re-issue of 1933 *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

This *New* or *Oxford* Dictionary was made possible only through the combination of a number of scholars with a vast army of voluntary helpers. 'It embraces', to quote the introduction of the edition of 1933, 'not only the standard language of literature and conversation, whether current at the moment, or obsolete, or archaic, but also the main technical vocabulary, and a large measure of dialectal usage and slang.' The Editors state that 5,000,000 excerpts from English literature of every period were made. From these 1,800,000 quotations were actually printed and used as a basis for the *historical* treatment of each word and idiom in English.

To set Cawdrey's slim volume by the Oxford Dictionary is, as the editors themselves state, like 'placing the original acorn beside the oak that has grown out of it'. Any student of English has to come back to the *New* or *Oxford* Dictionary as his final authority.

I hope I will not seem ungrateful if, at the same time, I state my view that the editors of this dictionary, partly because they had such a wealth of illustrative examples, were a little tempted to allow the examples themselves to do the work of definition. In an historical dictionary this is perhaps inevitable. Again while this great dictionary is a fine instrument of scholarship it will not help those whose sole purpose is to write clearly in modern simple English. The *New* or *Oxford* Dictionary is equally interested in

the meaning of a word in the seventeenth century as in the twentieth century.

This has been recognized by the publication of *The Concise Dictionary of Current English* (Oxford University Press) which was adapted from the *New or Oxford Dictionary* by H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler with H. G. Le Mesurier as a later collaborator. This is more commonly known as *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* and since its first publication in 1911 it has been one of the most popular dictionaries in England. For its size the amount of information it contains is formidable, and I would estimate that between 300,000 and 400,000 words are defined and illustrated. While using the material in the *New or Oxford Dictionary* the Editors have confined themselves to *current* words though they have interpreted this very generously.

With all its merits a dictionary such as *The Concise Dictionary* has its limitations for the writer of Direct English. First, as it relies largely on the material of the *New or Oxford Dictionary* it is not always strong in the definition at least in the terms of current usage. In their introduction the editors state that they were 'very much alive to the inadequacy of mere definition and the need of constant illustration'. Yet it might be affirmed that whatever the merits of illustration the supreme art of lexicography is that power of definition which Johnson so supremely possessed.

Further, though they are preparing a dictionary of current usage they have been to some extent overpowered by the historical method of the *New* or *Oxford* Dictionary. Thus an historical dictionary will give one all the meanings of a word and normally give the earliest meaning first. A dictionary of current usage should give the most common meaning first, and leave out the antiquated meanings altogether. Normally, of course, the editors successfully follow this principle but there are occasions, too frequent to be regarded as exceptions, when the *historical* principle overwhelms them.

One of the more notorious examples is the definition of the word *cad*. The entry reads: 'Omnibus conductor; hanger-on employed about (especially school and college) games; member of lower classes; person of low manners; person guilty or capable of ungentlemanly conduct, black-guard'.

It is true that historically all these meanings exist but the only one in current usage is 'person guilty or capable of ungentlemanly conduct'. Here the historical entry leads to a result which in the terms of *current usage* is altogether misleading.

I take a few other examples. The *Concise Dictionary* defines *democracy*: 'state practising government by the people, direct or representative; *the* politically unprivileged class'.

Here the current meaning is given first but the additional

meaning 'the politically unprivileged class' is misleading in the terms of current usage.

Pantechnicon is defined as 'furniture warehouse (originally); name of a bazaar; pantechnicon van for removing furniture'. Historically again all this is accurate but in the terms of current usage a *pantechnicon* is a *van* and has no other meaning.

While, therefore, a dictionary such as *The Concise Dictionary* will serve a number of purposes it will not be much help to the writer of Direct English who is seeking simple and exact definitions, and is anxious to discover whether a complicated word or phrase can be covered by a shorter expression.

As far as I know there are only two dictionaries which are of assistance here.

(i) *The General Basic Dictionary* prepared under the direction of C. K. Ogden. In this dictionary more than 40,000 senses of over 20,000 words are explained in the 850 words of Basic English along with the 50 international words which go with them.

It is of interest to compare the definitions in the *Concise Dictionary* and in the *General Basic Dictionary*. For instance the *Concise Dictionary* has the following definitions of *barbarian* and of the words connected with it: *barbarian*: Foreigner differing from speaker in language and customs, especially in history a non-Greek, one outside the Roman Empire, a non-Christian, rude, wild, or uncultured person.

barbaric: Rude, rough, like or of barbarians, and their art or taste; hence *barbarically*. Adverb.

barbarism: Mixing of foreign or vulgar expressions in talk or writing; such an expression; absence of culture, ignorance and rudeness; instance of this.

barbarity: Savage cruelty, instance of it; barbaric style or taste, instance of it, usually *barbarism*.

barbarize: Make or become barbarous; corrupt (language). Hence barbarization.

barbarous: Language not Greek, not Greek or Latin; not pure, illiterate; people non-Greek, beyond Roman Empire, non-Christian, outlandish; uncivilized; cruel; coarse.

In the *Basic Dictionary* all this is reduced to the following:

barbarian: Person of society at low state of development; person without taste or education; Historically one outside Greece or Rome, or not a Christian. *barbaric*, *barbarous*, Sp. (i.e. an abbreviation for 'having a special sense now to be given'); cruel, rough. *barbarism*: Sp. word or form wrongly used. *barbarity*: Sp. cruel behaviour.

This brief entry, with its illuminating clarity, is obviously more helpful to those seeking a simple way of writing than the fuller entries in the *Concise Dictionary*.

(ii) The other dictionary of special value in connection with Direct English is the *Thorndike English Dictionary* published in 1948 by the English Universities Press. This is a longer work than the *Basic Dictionary* and defines a

much greater number of words. Dr Thorndike, an American psychologist, spent a long period of research in discovering the words most frequently used in the English language. His dictionary has a selection of the 50,000 words most frequently used in speech and literature. This dictionary has become a standard work in America and has been adapted for use in England by Dr P. B. Ballard.

It is of interest to compare the dictionary with the *Concise Dictionary* and with the *Basic Dictionary* for its entries for *barbarism*, and associated words. In the *Thorndike Dictionary* these read:

barbarian: 1. Person who is not civilized; 2. not civilized; cruel and coarse; almost savage; 3. foreigner differing from the speaker or writer in language and customs. In ancient times a barbarian was a person who was not a Greek, a person outside of the Roman Empire, or a person who was not a Christian; 4. differing from the speaker or writer in language and customs. 5. person without sympathy for literary culture or art.

barbaric: Like barbarians; suited to a barbarous people; rough and rude.

barbarism: 1. Condition of savages or uncivilized people; people who have no alphabet live in barbarism; 2. barbarous act, custom, or trait; 3. use of a word or expression not in good use; 4. word or expression not in good use.

Example: 'his'n' for 'his'.

barbarity: 1. Brutal cruelty; 2. act of cruelty; 3. barbaric manner, taste or style.

barbarize: 1. Make barbarous; become barbarous; 2. corrupt (a language) with barbarisms.

barbarous: 1. Not civilized; 2. rough, rude, coarse; 3. savagely cruel, brutal; 4. crude, harsh; 5. differing from the language and the customs of the speaker or writer; 6. filled with words or expressions not in good use.

From this it will be seen that the *Thorndike Dictionary* is prepared to occupy far more space with an entry than the *Concise Dictionary*. It confines itself, however, to current usage and in exploring such usage attempts to be exhaustive. The *Basic Dictionary* has a brilliant clarity of precise definition but does not cover so many shades of meaning. Both dictionaries will assist a writer in an exact definition of vocabulary and such an exact definition is an essential preliminary to the successful writing of Direct English.

I am not, of course, denying that the larger dictionaries are essential to every student of the language. But, at the same time, those who wish to practise Direct English will do well to use one of these dictionaries that emphasize the simple vocabulary of the language and define its current meaning.